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THE
BLACK ROBE

BY
WILKIE COLLINS



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BEFORE THE STORY.

FIRST SCENE.

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.—THE DUEL.

I.

THE doctors could do no more for the Dowager Lady Berrick.

When the medical advisers of a lady who has reached seventy years of age recommend the mild climate of the South of France, they mean in plain language that they have arrived at the end of their resources. Her ladyship gave the mild climate a fair trial, and then decided (as she herself expressed it) to 'die at home.' Travelling slowly, she had reached Paris at the date when I last heard of her. It was then the beginning of November. A week later, I

met with her nephew, Lewis Romaine, at the club.

‘What brings you to London at this time of year?’ I asked.

‘The fatality that pursues me,’ he answered grimly. ‘I am one of the unluckiest men living.’

He was thirty years old; he was not married; he was the enviable possessor of the fine old country seat, called Vange Abbey; he had no poor relations; and he was one of the handsomest men in England. When I add that I am, myself, a retired army officer, with a wretched income, a disagreeable wife, four ugly children, and a burden of fifty years on my back, no one will be surprised to hear that I answered Romaine, with bitter sincerity, in these words:

‘I wish to Heaven I could change places with you!’

‘I wish to Heaven you could!’ he burst out, with equal sincerity, on his side. ‘Read that.’

He handed me a letter addressed to him by the travelling medical attendant of Lady Berrick. After resting in Paris, the patient had continued her homeward journey as far as Boulogne. In her suffering condition, she was liable to sudden fits of caprice. An insurmountable horror of the Channel passage had got possession of her: she positively refused to be taken on board the steamboat. In this difficulty, the lady who held the post of her ‘companion’ had ventured on a suggestion. Would Lady Berrick consent to make the Channel passage if her nephew came to Boulogne expressly to accompany

her on the voyage? The reply had been so immediately favourable, that the doctor lost no time in communicating with Mr. Lewis Romaine. This was the substance of the letter.

It was needless to ask any more questions—Romaine was plainly on his way to Boulogne. I gave him some useful information. ‘Try the oysters,’ I said, ‘at the restaurant on the pier.’

He never even thanked me. He was thinking entirely of himself.

‘Just look at my position,’ he said. ‘I detest Boulogne; I cordially share my aunt’s horror of the Channel passage; I had looked forward to some months of happy retirement in the country among my books—and what happens to me? I am brought to London in this season of fogs, to travel by the tidal

train at seven to-morrow morning—and all for a woman with whom I have no sympathies in common. If I am not an unlucky man—who is ?’

He spoke in a tone of vehement irritation which seemed to me, under the circumstances, to be simply absurd. But *my* nervous system is not the irritable system—sorely tried by night study and strong tea—of my friend Romaine. ‘It’s only a matter of two days,’ I remarked, by way of reconciling him to his situation.

‘How do I know that?’ he retorted. ‘In two days the weather may be stormy. In two days she may be too ill to be moved. Unfortunately, I am her heir ; and I am told I must submit to any whim that seizes her. I’m rich enough already ; I don’t want her money. Besides, I dislike all travelling—

and especially travelling alone. You are an idle man. If you were a good friend, you would offer to go with me.' He added, with the delicacy which was one of the redeeming points in his wayward character, 'Of course as my guest.'

I had known him long enough not to take offence at his reminding me, in this considerate way, that I was a poor man. The proposed change of scene tempted me. What did I care for the Channel passage? Besides, there was the irresistible attraction of getting away from home. The end of it was that I accepted Romaine's invitation.

II.

SHORTLY after noon, on the next day, we were established at Boulogne—near Lady Berrick, but not at her hotel. ‘If we live in the same house,’ Romaine reminded me, ‘we shall be bored by the companion and the doctor. Meetings on the stairs, you know, and exchanging bows and small talk.’ He hated those trivial conventionalities of society, in which other people delight. When somebody once asked him in what company he felt most at ease? he made a shocking answer—he said, ‘In the company of dogs.’

I waited for him on the pier while he

went to see her ladyship. He joined me again, with his bitterest smile. ‘What did I tell you? She is not well enough to see me to-day. The doctor looks grave, and the companion puts her handkerchief to her eyes. We may be kept in this place for weeks to come.’

The afternoon proved to be rainy. Our early dinner was a bad one. This last circumstance tried his temper sorely. He was no gourmand; the question of cookery was (with him) purely a matter of digestion. Those late hours of study, and that abuse of tea to which I have already alluded, had sadly injured his stomach. The doctors warned him of serious consequences to his nervous system, unless he altered his habits. He had little faith in medical science, and he greatly overrated the restorative capacity

of his constitution. So far as I know, he had always neglected the doctors' advice.

The weather cleared towards evening, and we went out for a walk. We passed a church—a Roman Catholic church, of course—the doors of which were still open. Some poor women were kneeling at their prayers in the dim light. ‘Wait a minute,’ said Romaine. ‘I am in a vile temper. Let me try to put myself into a better frame of mind.’

I followed him into the church. He knelt down in a dark corner by himself. I confess I was surprised. He had been baptised in the Church of England; but, so far as outward practice was concerned, he belonged to no religious community. I had often heard him speak with sincere reverence and admiration of the spirit of Christianity—

but he never, to my knowledge, attended any place of public worship, When we met again outside the church, I asked if he had been converted to the Roman Catholic faith.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I hate the inveterate striving of that priesthood after social influence and political power as cordially as the fiercest Protestant living. But let us not forget that the Church of Rome has great merits to set against great faults. Its system is administered with an admirable knowledge of the higher needs of human nature. Take as one example what you have just seen. The solemn tranquillity of that church, the poor people praying near me, the few words of prayer by which I silently united myself to my fellow-creatures have calmed me, and done me good. In *our* country I should have

found the church closed, out of service hours.' He took my arm, and abruptly changed the subject. 'How will you occupy yourself,' he asked, 'if my aunt receives me to-morrow?'

I assured him that I should easily find ways and means of getting through the time. The next morning a message came from Lady Berrick, to say that she would see her nephew after breakfast. Left by myself, I walked towards the pier, and met with a man who asked me to hire his boat. He had lines and bait, at my service. Most unfortunately, as the event proved, I decided on occupying an hour or two by sea fishing.

The wind shifted while we were out, and before we could get back to the harbour, the tide had turned against us. It was six o'clock when I arrived at the hotel. A little

open carriage was waiting at the door. I found Romaine impatiently expecting me, and no signs of dinner on the table. He informed me that he had accepted an invitation, in which I was included, and promised to explain everything in the carriage.

Our driver took the road that led towards the High Town. I subordinated my curiosity to my sense of politeness, and asked for news of his aunt's health.

‘She is seriously ill, poor soul,’ he said.

I am sorry I spoke so petulantly and so unfairly, when we met at the club. The near prospect of death has developed qualities in her nature which I ought to have seen before this. No matter how it may be delayed, I will patiently wait her time for the crossing to England.’

So long as he believed himself to be in

the right, he was, as to his actions and opinions, one of the most obstinate men I ever met with. But once let him be convinced that he was wrong, and he rushed into the other extreme—became needlessly distrustful of himself, and needlessly eager in seizing his opportunity of making atonement. In this latter mood he was capable (with the best intentions) of committing acts of the most childish imprudence. With some misgivings, I asked how he had amused himself in my absence.

‘I waited for you,’ he said, ‘till I lost all patience, and went out for a walk. First, I thought of going to the beach, but the smell of the harbour drove me back into the town; and there, oddly enough, I met with a man, a certain Captain Peterkin, who had been a friend of mine at college.’

‘ A visitor to Boulogne ? ’ I inquired.

‘ Not exactly.’

‘ A resident ? ’

‘ Yes. The fact is, I lost sight of Peterkin when I left Oxford—and since that time he seems to have drifted into difficulties. We had a long talk. He is living here, he tells me, until his affairs are settled.’

I needed no further enlightenment—Captain Peterkin stood as plainly revealed to me as if I had known him for years. ‘ Isn’t it a little imprudent,’ I said, ‘ to renew your acquaintance with a man of that sort ? Couldn’t you have passed him, with a bow ? ’

Romayne smiled uneasily. ‘ I dare say you’re right,’ he answered. ‘ But, remember, I had left my aunt, feeling ashamed of the unjust way in which I had thought and spoken of

her. How did I know that I mightn't be wronging an old friend next, if I kept Peterkin at a distance? His present position may be as much his misfortune, poor fellow, as his fault. I was half inclined to pass him, as you say—but I distrusted my own judgment. He held out his hand, and he was so glad to see me. It can't be helped now. I shall be anxious to hear your opinion of him.'

'Are we going to dine with Captain Peterkin?'

'Yes. I happened to mention that wretched dinner yesterday at our hotel. He said, 'Come to my boarding-house. Out of Paris, there isn't such a table d'hôte in France.' I tried to get off it—not caring, as you know, to go among strangers—I said I had a friend with me. He invited you

most cordially to accompany me. More excuses on my part only led to a painful result. I hurt Peterkin's feelings. 'I'm down in the world,' he said, 'and I'm not fit company for you and your friends. I beg your pardon for taking the liberty of inviting you!' He turned away with the tears in his eyes. What could I do?'

I thought to myself, 'You could have lent him five pounds, and got rid of his invitation without the slightest difficulty.' If I had returned in reasonable time to go out with Romaine, we might not have met the captain—or, if we had met him, my presence would have prevented the confidential talk and the invitation that followed. I felt I was to blame—and yet, how could I help it? It was useless to remonstrate: the mischief was done.

We left the Old Town on our right hand, and drove on, past a little colony of suburban villas, to a house standing by itself, surrounded by a stone wall. As we crossed the front garden on our way to the door, I noticed against the side of the house two kennels, inhabited by two large watch-dogs. Was the proprietor afraid of thieves?

III.

THE moment we were introduced to the drawing-room, my suspicions of the company we were likely to meet with were fully confirmed.

‘Cards, billiards, and betting’—there was the inscription legibly written on the manner and appearance of Captain Peterkin. The bright-eyed yellow old lady who kept the boarding-house would have been worth five thousand pounds in jewellery alone, if the ornaments which profusely covered her had been genuine precious stones. The younger ladies present had their cheeks as highly rouged and their eyelids as elabo-

rately pencilled in black as if they were going on the stage, instead of going to dinner. We found these fair creatures drinking Madeira as a whet to their appetites. Among the men, there were two who struck me as the most finished and complete blackguards whom I had ever met with in all my experience, at home and abroad. One, with a brown face and a broken nose, was presented to us by the title of 'Commander,' and was described as a person of great wealth and distinction in Peru, travelling for amusement. The other wore a military uniform and decorations, and was spoken of as 'the General.' A bold bullying manner, a fat sodden face, little leering eyes, and greasy-looking hands, made this man so repellent to me that I privately longed to kick him. Romaine had evidently been

announced, before our arrival, as a landed gentleman with a large income. Men and women vied in servile attentions to him. When we went into the dining-room, the fascinating creature who sat next to him held her fan before her face, and so made a private interview of it between the rich Englishman and herself. With regard to the dinner, I shall only report that it justified Captain Peterkin's boast, in some degree at least. The wine was good, and the conversation became gay to the verge of indelicacy. Usually the most temperate of men, Romaine was tempted by his neighbours into drinking freely. I was unfortunately seated at the opposite extremity of the table, and I had no opportunity of warning him.

The dinner reached its conclusion, and we

all returned together, on the foreign plan, to coffee and cigars in the drawing-room. The women smoked, and drank liqueurs as well as coffee, with the men. One of them went to the piano, and a little impromptu ball followed, the ladies dancing with their cigarettes in their mouths. Keeping my eyes and ears on the alert, I saw an innocent-looking table, with a surface of rose-wood, suddenly develop a substance of green cloth. At the same time, a neat little roulette-table made its appearance from a hiding-place in a sofa. Passing near the venerable landlady, I heard her ask the servant, in a whisper, ‘if the dogs were loose?’ After what I had observed, I could only conclude that the dogs were used as a patrol, to give the alarm in case of a descent of the police. It was plainly high time to

thank Captain Peterkin for his hospitality, and to take our leave.

‘We have had enough of this,’ I whispered to Romaine in English. ‘Let us go.’

In these days it is a delusion to suppose that you can speak confidentially in the English language, when French people are within hearing. One of the ladies asked Romaine, tenderly, if he was tired of her already. Another reminded him that it was raining heavily (as we could all hear), and suggested waiting until it cleared up. The hideous General waved his greasy hand in the direction of the card table, and said, ‘The game is waiting for us.’

Romaine was excited, but not stupefied, by the wine he had drunk. He answered, discreetly enough, ‘I must beg you to excuse me; I am a poor card player.’

The General suddenly looked grave. ‘You are speaking, sir, under a strange misapprehension,’ he said. ‘Our game is lansquenet—essentially a game of chance. With luck, the poorest player is a match for the whole table.’

Romayne persisted in his refusal. As a matter of course, I supported him, with all needful care to avoid giving offence. The General took offence, nevertheless. He crossed his arms on his breast, and looked at us fiercely.

‘Does this mean, gentlemen, that you distrust the company?’ he asked.

The broken-nosed Commander, hearing the question, immediately joined us, in the interests of peace—bearing with him the elements of persuasion, under the form of a lady on his arm.

The lady stepped briskly forward, and tapped the General on the shoulder with her fan. ‘*I am one of the company,*’ she said, ‘and I am sure Mr. Romaine doesn’t distrust *me.*’ She turned to Romaine with her most irresistible smile. ‘A gentleman always plays cards,’ she resumed, ‘when he has a lady for a partner. Let us join our interests at the table—and, dear Mr. Romaine, don’t risk too much!’ She put her pretty little purse into his hand, and looked as if she had been in love with him for half her lifetime.

The fatal influence of the sex, assisted by wine, produced the inevitable result. Romaine allowed himself to be led to the card table. For a moment, the General delayed the beginning of the game. After what had happened, it was necessary that he should assert the strict sense of justice that was in

him. ‘We are all honourable men,’ he began.

‘And brave men,’ the Commander added, admiring the General.

‘And brave men,’ the General admitted, admiring the Commander. ‘Gentlemen, if I have been led into expressing myself with unnecessary warmth of feeling, I apologise, and regret it.’

‘Nobly spoken!’ the Commander pronounced. The General put his hand on his heart and bowed. The game began.

As the poorest man of the two, I had escaped the attentions lavished by the ladies on Romaine. At the same time, I was obliged to pay for my dinner, by taking some part in the proceedings of the evening. Small stakes were allowed, I found, at roulette; and, besides, the heavy chances in

favour of the table made it hardly worth while to run the risk of cheating in this case. I placed myself next to the least rascally-looking man in the company, and played roulette.

For a wonder, I was successful at the first attempt. My neighbour handed me my winnings. 'I have lost every farthing I possess,' he whispered to me, piteously, 'and I have a wife and children at home.' I lent the poor wretch five francs. He smiled faintly as he looked at the money. 'It reminds me,' he said, 'of my last transaction, when I borrowed of that gentleman there, who is betting on the General's luck at the card table. Beware of employing him as I did. What do you think I got for my note of hand of four thousand francs? A hundred bottles of champagne, fifty bottles of

ink, fifty bottles of blacking, three dozen handkerchiefs, two pictures by unknown masters, two shawls, one hundred maps, *and* —five francs.’

We went on playing. My luck deserted me ; I lost, and lost, and lost again. From time to time I looked round at the card table. The ‘deal’ had fallen early to the General, and it seemed to be indefinitely prolonged. A heap of notes and gold (won mainly from Romaine, as I afterwards discovered) lay before him. As for my neighbour, the unhappy possessor of the bottles of blacking, the pictures by unknown masters, and the rest of it, he won, and then rashly presumed on his good fortune. Deprived of his last farthing, he retired into a corner of the room, and consoled himself with a cigar. I had just risen, to follow his example,

when a furious uproar burst out at the card table.

I saw Romaine spring up, and snatch the cards out of the General's hand. 'You scoundrel!' he shouted, 'you are cheating!' The General started to his feet in a fury. 'You lie!' he cried. I attempted to interfere, but Romaine had already seen the necessity of controlling himself. 'A gentleman doesn't accept an insult from a swindler,' he said, coolly. 'Accept this, then!' the General answered—and spat on him. In an instant Romaine knocked him down.

The blow was dealt straight between his eyes: he was a gross big-boned man, and he fell heavily. For the time he was stunned. The women ran, screaming, out of the room. The peaceable Commander trembled from head to foot. Two of the men present, who,

to give them their due, were no cowards, locked the doors. ‘You don’t go,’ they said, ‘till we see whether he recovers or not.’ Cold water, assisted by the landlady’s smelling salts, brought the General to his senses after a while. He whispered something to one of his friends, who immediately turned to me. ‘The General challenges Mr. Romaine,’ he said. ‘As one of his seconds, I demand an appointment for to-morrow morning.’ I refused to make any appointment unless the doors were first unlocked, and we were left free to depart. ‘Our carriage is waiting outside,’ I added. ‘If it returns to the hotel without us, there will be an inquiry.’ This latter consideration had its effect. On their side, the doors were opened. On our side, the appointment was made. We left the house.

IV.

IN consenting to receive the General's representatives, it is needless to say that I merely desired to avoid provoking another quarrel. If those persons were really impudent enough to call at the hotel, I had arranged to threaten them with the interference of the police, and so to put an end to the matter. Romaine expressed no opinion on the subject, one way or the other. His conduct inspired me with a feeling of uneasiness. The filthy insult of which he had been made the object seemed to be rankling in his mind. He went away thoughtfully to his own room. 'Have you nothing to say to

me,' I asked. He only answered, 'Wait till to-morrow.'

The next day the seconds appeared.

I had expected to see two of the men with whom we had dined. To my astonishment, the visitors proved to be officers of the General's regiment. They brought proposals for a hostile meeting the next morning ; the choice of weapons being left to Romaine as the challenged man.

It was now quite plain to me that the General's peculiar method of card-playing had, thus far, not been discovered and exposed. He might keep doubtful company, and might (as I afterwards heard) be suspected in certain quarters. But that he still had, formally-speaking, a reputation to preserve, was proved by the appearance of the two gentlemen present as his representatives.

They declared, with evident sincerity, that Romaine had made a fatal mistake ; had provoked the insult offered to him ; and had resented it by a brutal and cowardly outrage. As a man and a soldier, the General was doubly bound to insist on a duel. No apology would be accepted, even if an apology were offered.

In this emergency, as I understood it, there was but one course to follow. I refused to receive the challenge.

Being asked for my reasons, I found it necessary to speak within certain limits. Though we knew the General to be a cheat, it was a delicate matter to dispute his right to claim satisfaction, when he had found two officers to carry his message. I produced the seized cards (which Romaine had brought away with him in his pocket), and

offered them as a formal proof that my friend had not been mistaken.

The seconds—evidently prepared for this circumstance by their principal—declined to examine the cards. In the first place, they said, not even the discovery of foul play (supposing the discovery to have been really made) could justify Romaine's conduct. In the second place, the General's high character made it impossible, under any circumstances, that *he* could be responsible. Like ourselves, he had rashly associated with bad company; and he had been the innocent victim of an error or a fraud, committed by some other person present at the table.

Driven to my last resource, I could now only base my refusal to receive the challenge on the ground that we were Englishmen, and that the practice of duelling had been

abolished in England. Both the seconds at once declined to accept this statement in justification of my conduct.

‘You are now in France,’ said the elder of the two, ‘where a duel is the established remedy for an insult, among gentlemen. You are bound to respect the social laws of the country in which you are for the time residing. If you refuse to do so, you lay yourselves open to a public imputation on your courage, of a nature too degrading to be more particularly alluded to. Let us adjourn this interview for three hours on the ground of informality. We ought to confer with *two* gentlemen, acting on Mr. Romaine’s behalf. Be prepared with another second to meet us, and reconsider your decision before we call again.’

The Frenchmen had barely taken their

departure by one door, when Romaine entered by another.

‘I have heard it all,’ he said quietly. ‘Accept the challenge.’

I declare solemnly that I left no means untried of opposing my friend’s resolution. No man could have felt more strongly convinced than I did, that nothing could justify the course he was taking. My remonstrances were completely thrown away. He was deaf to sense and reason, from the moment when he had heard an imputation on his courage suggested as a possible result of any affair in which he was concerned.

‘With your views,’ he said, ‘I won’t ask you to accompany me to the ground. I can easily find French seconds. And mind this, if you attempt to prevent the meeting, the duel will take place elsewhere

—and our friendship is at an end from that moment.’

After this, I suppose it is needless to add that I accompanied him to the ground the next morning as one of his seconds.

V.

WE were punctual to the appointed hour—eight o'clock.

The second who acted with me was a French gentleman, a relative of one of the officers who had brought the challenge. At his suggestion, we had chosen the pistol as our weapon. Romaine, like most Englishmen at the present time, knew nothing of the use of the sword. He was almost equally inexperienced with the pistol.

Our opponents were late. They kept us waiting for more than ten minutes. It was not pleasant weather to wait in. The day had dawned damp and drizzling. A thick

white fog was slowly rolling in on us from the sea.

When they did appear, the General was not among them. A tall, well-dressed young man saluted Romaine with stern courtesy, and said to a stranger who accompanied him, 'Explain the circumstances.'

The stranger proved to be a surgeon. He entered at once on the necessary explanation. The General was too ill to appear. He had been attacked that morning by a fit—the consequence of the blow that he had received. Under these circumstances, his eldest son (Maurice) was now on the ground to fight the duel, on his father's behalf; attended by the General's seconds, and with the General's full approval.

We instantly refused to allow the duel to take place; Romaine loudly declaring

that he had no quarrel with the General's son. Upon this, Maurice broke away from his seconds ; drew off one of his gloves ; and stepping close up to Romaine, struck him on the face with the glove. ' Have you no quarrel with me now ? ' the young Frenchman asked. ' Must I spit on you, as my father did ? ' His seconds dragged him away, and apologised to us for the outbreak. But the mischief was done. Romaine's fiery temper flashed in his eyes. ' Load the pistols,' he said. After the insult publicly offered to him, and the outrage publicly threatened, there was no other course to take.

It had been left to us to produce the pistols. We therefore requested the seconds of our opponent to examine, and to load them. While this was being done, the advancing sea-fog so completely enveloped

us, that the duellists were unable to see each other. We were obliged to wait for the chance of a partial clearing in the atmosphere. Romaine's temper had become calm again. The generosity of his nature spoke in the words which he now addressed to his seconds.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘the young man is a good son—he is bent on redressing what he believes to be his father's wrong. Does his flipping his glove in my face matter to me? I think I shall fire in the air.’

‘I shall refuse to act as your second if you do,’ answered the French gentleman who was assisting us. ‘The General's son is famous for his skill with the pistol. If you didn't see it in his face just now, I did—he means to kill you. Defend your life, sir!’ I spoke quite as strongly, to the same

purpose, when my turn came. Romaine yielded—he placed himself unreservedly in our hands.

In a quarter of an hour the fog lifted a little. We measured the distance, having previously arranged (at my suggestion) that the two men should both fire at the same moment, at a given signal. Romaine's composure, as they faced each other, was, in a man of his irritable nervous temperament, really wonderful. I placed him sideways, in a position which in some degree lessened his danger, by lessening the surface exposed to the bullet. My French colleague put the pistol into his hand, and gave him the last word of advice. 'Let your arm hang loosely down, with the barrel of the pistol pointing straight to the ground. When you hear the signal, only lift your arm as far

as the elbow; keep the elbow pressed against your side—and fire.’ We could do no more for him. As we drew aside—I own it—my tongue was like a cinder in my mouth, and a horrid inner cold crept through me to the marrow of my bones.

The signal was given, and the two shots were fired at the same time.

My first look was at Romaine. He took off his hat, and handed it to me with a smile. His adversary’s bullet had cut a piece out of the brim of his hat, on the right side. He had literally escaped by a hairbreadth.

While I was congratulating him, the fog gathered again more thickly than ever. Looking anxiously towards the ground occupied by our adversaries, we could only see vague, shadowy forms hurriedly crossing

and re-crossing each other in the mist. Something had happened! My French colleague took my arm and pressed it significantly. ‘Leave *me* to inquire,’ he said. Romaine tried to follow; I held him back—we neither of us exchanged a word.

The fog thickened and thickened, until nothing was to be seen. Once we heard the surgeon’s voice, calling impatiently for a light to help him. No light appeared that *we* could see. Dreary as the fog itself, the silence gathered round us again. On a sudden it was broken, horribly broken, by another voice, strange to both of us, shrieking hysterically through the impenetrable mist. ‘Where is he?’ the voice cried, in the French language. ‘Assassin! Assassin! where are you?’ Was it a woman? or was it a boy? We heard nothing more. The

effect upon Romaine was terrible to see. He who had calmly confronted the weapon lifted to kill him, shuddered dumbly like a terror-stricken animal. I put my arm round him, and hurried him away from the place.

We waited at the hotel until our French friend joined us. After a brief interval he appeared, announcing that the surgeon would follow him.

The duel had ended fatally. The chance course of the bullet, urged by Romaine's unpractised hand, had struck the General's son just above the right nostril—had penetrated to the back of his neck—and had communicated a fatal shock to the spinal marrow. He was a dead man before they could take him back to his father's house.

So far, our fears were confirmed. But

there was something else to tell, for which our worst presentiments had not prepared us.

A younger brother of the fallen man (a boy of thirteen years old) had secretly followed the duelling party, on their way from his father's house—had hidden himself—and had seen the dreadful end. The seconds only knew of it when he burst out of his place of concealment, and fell on his knees by his dying brother's side. His were the frightful cries which we had heard from invisible lips. The slayer of his brother was the 'assassin' whom he had vainly tried to discover through the fathomless obscurity of the mist.

We both looked at Romaine. He silently looked back at us, like a man turned to stone. I tried to reason with him.

‘Your life was at your opponent’s mercy,’ I said. ‘It was *he* who was skilled in the use of the pistol; your risk was infinitely greater than his. Are you responsible for an accident? Rouse yourself, Romaine! Think of the time to come, when all this will be forgotten.’

‘Never,’ he said, ‘to the end of my life.’

He made that reply in dull monotonous tones. His eyes looked wearily and vacantly straight before him. I spoke to him again. He remained impenetrably silent; he appeared not to hear, or not to understand me. The surgeon came in, while I was still at a loss what to say or do next. Without waiting to be asked for his opinion, he observed Romaine attentively, and then drew me away into the next room.

‘Your friend is suffering from a severe

nervous shock,' he said. 'Can you tell me anything of his habits of life?'

I mentioned the prolonged night studies, and the excessive use of tea. The surgeon shook his head.

'If you want my advice,' he proceeded, 'take him home at once. Don't subject him to further excitement, when the result of the duel is known in the town. If it ends in our appearing in a court of law, it will be a mere formality in this case, and you can surrender when the time comes. Leave me your address in London.'

I felt that the wisest thing I could do was to follow his advice. The boat crossed to Folkestone at an early hour that day—we had no time to lose. Romaine offered no objection to our return to England; he seemed perfectly careless what became of

him. ‘Leave me quiet,’ he said; ‘and do as you like.’ I wrote a few lines to Lady Berrick’s medical attendant, informing him of the circumstances. A quarter of an hour afterwards we were on board the steamboat.

There were very few passengers. After we had left the harbour, my attention was attracted by a young English lady—travelling, apparently, with her mother. As we passed her on the deck she looked at Romaine, with compassionate interest so vividly expressed in her beautiful face, that I imagined they might be acquainted. With some difficulty, I prevailed sufficiently over the torpor that possessed him to induce him to look at our fellow-passenger.

‘Do you know that charming person?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he replied, with the weariest in-

difference. 'I never saw her before. I'm tired—tired—tired! Don't speak to me; leave me by myself.'

I left him. His rare personal attractions—of which, let me add, he never appeared to be conscious—had evidently made their natural appeal to the interest and admiration of the young lady who had met him by chance. The expression of resigned sadness and suffering, now visible in his face, added greatly no doubt to the influence that he had unconsciously exercised over the sympathies of a delicate and sensitive woman. It was no uncommon circumstance in his past experience of the sex—as I myself well knew—to be the object, not of admiration only, but of true and ardent love. He had never reciprocated the passion—had never even appeared to take it seriously. Marriage

might, as the phrase is, be the salvation of him. Would he ever marry?

Leaning over the bulwark, idly pursuing this train of thought, I was recalled to present things by a low sweet voice—the voice of the lady of whom I had been thinking.

‘Excuse me for disturbing you,’ she said; ‘I think your friend wants you.’

She spoke with the modesty and self-possession of a highly-bred woman. A little heightening of her colour made her, to my eyes, more beautiful than ever. I thanked her, and hastened back to Romaine.

He was standing by the barred skylight which guarded the machinery. I instantly noticed a change in him. His eyes wandering here and there, in search of me, had more than recovered their animation—there

was a wild look of terror in them. He seized me roughly by the arm, and pointed down to the engine-room.

‘What do you hear there?’ he asked.

‘I hear the thump of the engines.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Nothing. What do *you* hear?’

He suddenly turned away.

‘I’ll tell you,’ he said, ‘when we get on shore.’

SECOND SCENE.

VANGE ABBEY.—THE FOREWARNINGS.

VI.

As we approached the harbour at Folkestone, Romaine's agitation appeared to subside. His head drooped; his eyes half closed—he looked like a weary man quietly falling asleep.

On leaving the steamboat, I ventured to ask our charming fellow-passenger if I could be of any service in reserving places in the London train for her mother and herself. She thanked me, and said they were going to visit some friends at Folkestone. In making this reply, she looked at Romaine. 'I am afraid he is very ill?' she said, in gently lowered tones. Before I could

answer, her mother turned to her with an expression of surprise, and directed her attention to the friends whom she had mentioned, waiting to greet her. Her last look, as they took her away, rested tenderly and sorrowfully on Romaine. He never returned it—he was not even aware of it. As I led him to the train he leaned more and more heavily on my arm. Seated in the carriage, he sank at once into profound sleep.

We drove to the hotel at which my friend was accustomed to reside when he was in London. His long sleep on the journey seemed, in some degree, to have relieved him. We dined together in his private room. When the servants had withdrawn, I found that the unhappy result of the duel was still preying on his mind.

‘The horror of having killed that man,’

he said, 'is more than I can bear alone. For God's sake, don't leave me!'

I had received letters at Boulogne, which informed me that my wife and family had accepted an invitation to stay with some friends at the sea-side. Under these circumstances, I was entirely at his service. Having quieted his anxiety on this point, I reminded him of what had passed between us on board the steamboat. He tried to change the subject. My curiosity was too strongly aroused to permit this; I persisted in helping his memory.

'We were looking into the engine-room,' I said; 'and you asked me what I heard there. You promised to tell me what *you* heard, as soon as we got on shore——'

He stopped me, before I could say more

'I begin to think it was a delusion,' he

answered. ‘You ought not to interpret too literally what a person in my dreadful situation may say. The stain of another man’s blood is on me——’

I interrupted him in my turn. ‘I refuse to hear you speak of yourself in that way,’ I said. ‘You are no more responsible for the Frenchman’s death than if you had been driving, and had accidentally run over him in the street. I am not the right companion for a man who talks as you do. The proper person to be with you is a doctor.’ I really felt irritated with him—and I saw no reason for concealing it.

Another man, in his place, might have been offended with me. There was a native sweetness in Romaine’s disposition, which asserted itself even in his worst moments of nervous irritability. He took my hand.

‘Don’t be hard on me,’ he pleaded. ‘I will try to think of it as you do. Make some little concession on your side. I want to see how I get through the night. We will return to what I said to you on board the steamboat to-morrow morning. Is it agreed?’

It was agreed, of course. There was a door of communication between our bedrooms. At his suggestion it was left open. ‘If I find I can’t sleep,’ he explained, ‘I want to feel assured that you can hear me if I call to you.’

Three times in the night I woke, and, seeing the light burning in his room, looked in at him. He always carried some of his books with him when he travelled. On each occasion when I entered the room, he was reading quietly. ‘I suppose I fore-

stalled my night's sleep on the railway,' he said. 'It doesn't matter; I am content. Something that I was afraid of has not happened. I am used to wakeful nights. Go back to bed, and don't be uneasy about me.'

The next morning the deferred explanation was put off again.

'Do you mind waiting a little longer?' he asked.

'Not if you particularly wish it.'

'Will you do me another favour? You know that I don't like London. The noise in the streets is distracting. Besides, I may tell you I have a sort of distrust of noise, since——' He stopped, with an appearance of confusion.

'Since I found you looking into the engine-room?' I asked.

‘Yes. I don’t feel inclined to trust the chances of another night in London. I want to try the effect of perfect quiet. Do you mind going back with me to Vange? Dull as the place is, you can amuse yourself. There is good shooting, as you know.

In an hour more we had left London.

VII.

VANGE ABBEY is, as I suppose, the most solitary country house in England. If Romaine wanted quiet, it was exactly the place for him.

On the rising ground of one of the wildest moors in the North Riding of Yorkshire, the ruins of the old monastery are visible from all points of the compass. There are traditions of thriving villages clustering about the Abbey, in the days of the monks, and of hostelries devoted to the reception of pilgrims from every part of the Christian world. Not a vestige of these buildings is left. They were deserted

by the pious inhabitants, it is said, at the time when Henry the Eighth suppressed the monasteries, and gave the Abbey and the broad lands of Vange to his faithful friend and courtier, Sir Miles Romaine. In the next generation, the son and heir of Sir Miles built the dwelling-house, helping himself liberally from the solid stone walls of the monastery. With some unimportant alterations and repairs, the house stands, defying time and weather, to the present day.

At the last station on the railway, the horses were waiting for us. It was a lovely moonlight night, and we shortened the distance considerably by taking the bridle path over the moor. Between nine and ten o'clock we reached the Abbey.

Years had passed since I had last been

Romayne's guest. Nothing, out of the house or in the house, seemed to have undergone any change in the interval. Neither the good North-country butler, nor his buxom Scotch wife, skilled in cookery, looked any older : they received me as if I had left them a day or two since, and had come back again to live in Yorkshire. My well-remembered bedroom was waiting for me ; and the matchless old Madeira welcomed us when my host and I met in the inner-hall, which was the ordinary dining-room of the Abbey.

As we faced each other at the well-spread table, I began to hope that the familiar influences of his country home were beginning already to breathe their blessed quiet over the disturbed mind of Romayne. In the presence of his faithful

old servants, he seemed to be capable of controlling the morbid remorse that oppressed him. He spoke to them composedly and kindly; he was affectionately glad to see his old friend once more in the old house.

When we were near the end of our meal, something happened that startled me. I had just handed the wine to Romaine, and he had filled his glass—when he suddenly turned pale, and lifted his head like a man whose attention is unexpectedly roused. No person but ourselves was in the room; I was not speaking to him at the time. He looked round suspiciously at the door behind him, leading into the library, and rang the old-fashioned handbell which stood by him on the table. The servant was directed to close the door.

‘Are you cold?’ I asked.

‘No.’ He reconsidered that brief answer, and contradicted himself. ‘Yes—the library fire has burnt low, I suppose.’

In my position at the table, I had seen the fire : the grate was heaped with blazing coals and wood. I said nothing. The pale change in his face, and his contradictory reply, roused doubts in me which I had hoped never to feel again.

He pushed away his glass of wine, and still kept his eyes fixed on the closed door. His attitude and expression were plainly suggestive of the act of listening. Listening to what ?

After an interval, he abruptly addressed me. ‘Do you call it a quiet night?’ he said.

‘As quiet as quiet can be,’ I replied.

‘The wind has dropped—and even the fire doesn’t crackle. Perfect stillness, indoors and out.’

‘Out?’ he repeated. For a moment, he looked at me intently, as if I had started some new idea in his mind. I asked as lightly as I could, if I had said anything to surprise him. Instead of answering me, he sprang to his feet with a cry of terror, and left the room.

I hardly knew what to do. It was impossible, unless he returned immediately, to let this extraordinary proceeding pass without notice. After waiting for a few minutes, I rang the bell.

The old butler came in. He looked in blank amazement at the empty chair. ‘Where’s the master?’ he asked.

I could only answer that he had left the

table suddenly, without a word of explanation. ‘He may perhaps be ill,’ I added. ‘As his old servant, you can do no harm if you go and look for him. Say that I am waiting here, if he wants me.’

The minutes passed slowly and more slowly. I was left alone for so long a time that I began to feel seriously uneasy. My hand was on the bell again, when there was a knock at the door. I had expected to see the butler. It was the groom who entered the room.

‘Garthwaite can’t come down to you sir,’ said the man. ‘He asks if you will please go up to the master on the Belvidere.’

The house—extending round three sides of a square—was only two stories high. The flat roof, accessible through a species of hatchway, and still surrounded by its sturdy

stone parapet, was called ‘The Belvidere,’ in reference as usual to the fine view which it commanded. Fearing I knew not what, I mounted the ladder which led to the roof. Romaine received me with a harsh outburst of laughter — that saddest false laughter which is true trouble in disguise.

‘Here’s something to amuse you!’ he cried. ‘I believe old Garthwaite thinks I am drunk—he won’t leave me up here by myself.’

Letting this strange assertion remain unanswered, the butler withdrew. As he passed me on his way to the ladder, he whispered, ‘Be careful of the master! I tell you, sir, he has a bee in his bonnet this night.’

Although not of the north country myself, I knew the meaning of the phrase. Garthwaite

suspected that the master was nothing less than mad!

Romayne took my arm when we were alone—we walked slowly from end to end of the Belvidere. The moon was, by this time, low in the heavens; but her mild mysterious light still streamed over the roof of the house and the high heathy ground round it. I looked attentively at Romayne. He was deadly pale; his hand shook as it rested on my arm—and that was all. Neither in look nor manner did he betray the faintest sign of mental derangement. He had perhaps needlessly alarmed the faithful old servant by something that he had said or done. I determined to clear up that doubt immediately.

‘You left the table very suddenly,’ I said.
‘Did you feel ill?’

‘Not ill,’ he replied. ‘I was frightened. Look at me—I’m frightened still.’

‘What do you mean?’

Instead of answering, he repeated the strange question which he had put to me downstairs.

‘Do you call it a quiet night?’

Considering the time of year, and the exposed situation of the house, the night was almost preternaturally quiet. Throughout the vast open country all round us, not even a breath of air could be heard. The night-birds were away, or were silent at the time. But one sound was audible, when we stood still and listened—the cool quiet bubble of a little stream, lost to view in the valley-ground to the south.

‘I have told you already,’ I said. ‘So

still a night I never remember on this Yorkshire moor.'

He laid one hand heavily on my shoulder. 'What did the poor boy say of me, whose brother I killed?' he asked. 'What words did we hear through the dripping darkness of the mist?'

'I won't encourage you to think of them. I refuse to repeat the words.'

He pointed over the northward parapet.

'It doesn't matter whether you accept or refuse,' he said, 'I hear the boy at this moment——there!'

He repeated the horrid words—marking the pauses in the utterance of them with his finger, as if they were sounds that he heard:—

'Assassin! Assassin! where are you?'

‘ Good God ! ’ I cried. ‘ You don’t mean that you really *hear* the voice ? ’

‘ Do you hear what I say ? I hear the boy as plainly as you hear me. The voice screams at me through the clear moonlight, as it screamed at me through the sea-fog. Again and again. It’s all round the house. *That* way now, where the light just touches on the tops of the heather. Tell the servants to have the horses ready the first thing in the morning. We leave Vange Abbey to-morrow.’

These were wild words. If he had spoken them wildly, I might have shared the butler’s conclusion that his mind was deranged. There was no undue vehemence in his voice or his manner. He spoke with a melancholy resignation—he seemed like a prisoner submitting to a sentence that he

had deserved. Remembering the cases of men suffering from nervous disease who had been haunted by apparitions, I asked if he saw any imaginary figure under the form of a boy.

‘I see nothing,’ he said ; ‘I only hear. Look yourself. It is in the last degree improbable—but let us make sure that nobody has followed me from Boulogne, and is playing me a trick.’

We made the circuit of the Belvidere. On its eastward side, the house wall was built against one of the towers of the old Abbey. On the westward side, the ground sloped steeply down to a deep pool or tarn. Northward and southward, there was nothing to be seen but the open moor. Look where I might, with the moonlight to make the view plain to me, the solitude was

as void of any living creature as if we had been surrounded by the awful dead world of the moon.

‘Was it the boy’s voice that you heard on the voyage across the Channel?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I heard it for the first time—down in the engine-room ; rising and falling, rising and falling, like the sound of the engines themselves.’

‘And when did you hear it again?’

‘I feared to hear it in London. It left me, I should have told you, when we stepped ashore out of the steamboat. I was afraid that the noise of the traffic in the streets might bring it back to me. As you know, I passed a quiet night. I had the hope that my imagination had deceived me—that I was the victim of a delusion, as people say. It is no delusion. In the

perfect tranquillity of this place the voice has come back to me. While we were at table I heard it again—behind me, in the library. I heard it still, when the door was shut. I ran up here to try if it would follow me into the open air. It *has* followed me. We may as well go down again into the hall. I know now that there is no escaping from it. My dear old home has become horrible to me. Do you mind returning to London to-morrow?’

What I felt and feared in this miserable state of things matters little. The one chance I could see for Romaine was to obtain the best medical advice. I sincerely encouraged his idea of going back to London the next day.

We had sat together by the hall fire for about ten minutes, when he took out his

handkerchief, and wiped away the perspiration from his forehead, drawing a deep breath of relief. 'It has gone!' he said faintly.

'When you hear the boy's voice,' I asked, 'do you hear it continuously?'

'No, at intervals; sometimes longer, sometimes shorter.'

'And thus far, it comes to you suddenly, and leaves you suddenly?'

'Yes.'

'Do my questions annoy you?'

'I make no complaint,' he said sadly. 'You can see for yourself—I patiently suffer the punishment that I have deserved.'

I contradicted him at once. 'It is nothing of the sort! It's a nervous malady, which medical science can control and cure. Wait till we get to London.'

This expression of opinion produced no effect on him.

‘I have taken the life of a fellow-creature,’ he said. ‘I have closed the career of a young man who, but for me, might have lived long and happily and honourably. Say what you may, I am of the race of Cain. *He* had the mark set on his brow. I have *my* ordeal. Delude yourself, if you like, with false hopes. I can endure—and hope for nothing. Good-night.’

VIII.

EARLY the next morning, the good old butler came to me, in great perturbation, for a word of advice.

‘Do come, sir, and look at the master! I can’t find in my heart to wake him.’

It was time to wake him, if we were to go to London that day. I went into the bedroom. Although I was no doctor, the restorative importance of that profound and quiet sleep impressed itself on me so strongly, that I took the responsibility of leaving him undisturbed. The event proved that I had acted wisely. He slept until noon. There was no return of ‘the torment

of the voice'—as he called it, poor fellow. We passed a quiet day, excepting one little interruption, which I am warned not to pass over without a word of record in this narrative.

We had returned from a ride. Romaine had gone into the library to read; and I was just leaving the stables, after a look at some recent improvements, when a pony-chaise with a gentleman in it drove up to the door. He asked politely if he might be allowed to see the house. There were some fine pictures at Vange, as well as many interesting relics of antiquity; and the rooms were shown, in Romaine's absence, to the very few travellers who were adventurous enough to cross the heathy desert that surrounded the Abbey. On this occasion, the stranger was informed that Mr.

Romayne was at home. He at once apologised—with an appearance of disappointment, however, which induced me to step forward and speak to him.

‘Mr. Romayne is not very well,’ I said; ‘and I cannot venture to ask you into the house. But you will be welcome, I am sure, to walk round the grounds, and to look at the ruins of the Abbey.’

He thanked me, and accepted the invitation. I find no great difficulty in describing him, generally. He was elderly fat and cheerful; buttoned up in a long black frock coat, and presenting that closely shaven face and that inveterate expression of watchful humility about the eyes, which we all associate with the reverend personality of a priest.

To my surprise, he seemed, in some

degree at least, to know his way about the place. He made straight for the dreary little lake which I have already mentioned, and stood looking at it with an interest which was so incomprehensible to me, that I own I watched him.

He ascended the slope of the moorland, and entered the gate which led to the grounds. All that the gardeners had done to make the place attractive failed to claim his attention. He walked past lawns, shrubs, and flower-beds, and only stopped at an old stone fountain, which tradition declared to have been one of the ornaments of the garden in the time of the monks. Having carefully examined this relic of antiquity, he took a sheet of paper from his pocket, and consulted it attentively. It might have been a plan of the house and

grounds, or it might not—I can only report that he took the path which led him, by the shortest way, to the ruined Abbey church.

As he entered the roofless enclosure, he reverently removed his hat. It was impossible for me to follow him any further, without exposing myself to the risk of discovery. I sat down on one of the fallen stones, waiting to see him again. It must have been at least half an hour before he appeared. He thanked me for my kindness, as composedly as if he had quite expected to find me in the place that I occupied.

‘I have been deeply interested in all that I have seen,’ he said. ‘May I venture to ask, what is perhaps an indiscreet question on the part of a stranger?’

I ventured, on my side, to inquire what the question might be.

‘Mr. Romaine is indeed fortunate,’ he resumed, ‘in the possession of this beautiful place. He is a young man, I think?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is he married?’

‘No.’

‘Excuse my curiosity. The owner of Vange Abbey is an interesting person to all good antiquaries like myself. Many thanks again. Good-day.’

His pony-chaise took him away. His last look rested—not on me—but on the old Abbey.

IX.

My record of events approaches its conclusion.

On the next day we returned to the hotel in London. At Romaine's suggestion, I sent the same evening to my own house for any letters which might be waiting for me. His mind still dwelt on the duel: he was morbidly eager to know if any communication had been received from the French surgeon.

When the messenger returned with my letters, the Boulogne post-mark was on one of the envelopes. At Romaine's entreaty,

this was the letter that I opened first. The surgeon's signature was at the end.

One motive for anxiety—on my part—was set at rest in the first lines. After an official inquiry into the circumstances, the French authorities had decided that it was not expedient to put the survivor of the duellists on his trial before a court of law. No jury, hearing the evidence, would find him guilty of the only charge that could be formally brought against him—the charge of ‘homicide by premeditation.’ Homicide by misadventure, occurring in a duel, was not a punishable offence by the French law. My correspondent cited many cases in proof of it, strengthened by the publicly-expressed opinion of the illustrious Berryer himself. In a word, we had nothing to fear.

The next page of the letter informed us

that the police had surprised the card-playing community with whom we had spent the evening at Boulogne, and that the much-bejewelled old landlady had been sent to prison for the offence of keeping a gambling-house. It was suspected in the town that the General was more or less directly connected with certain disreputable circumstances discovered by the authorities. In any case, he had retired from active service. He and his wife and family had left Boulogne, and had gone away in debt. No investigation had thus far succeeded in discovering the place of their retreat.

Reading this letter aloud to Romaine, I was interrupted by him at the last sentence.

‘The inquiries must have been carelessly made,’ he said. ‘I will see to it myself.’

‘What interest can *you* have in the inquiries?’ I exclaimed.

‘The strongest possible interest,’ he answered. ‘It has been my one hope to make some little atonement to the poor people whom I have so cruelly wronged. If the wife and children are in distressed circumstances (which seems to be only too likely) I may place them beyond the reach of anxiety—anonymously, of course. Give me the surgeon’s address. I shall write instructions for tracing them at my expense—merely announcing that an Unknown Friend desires to be of service to the General’s family.’

This appeared to me to be a most imprudent thing to do. I said so plainly—and quite in vain. With his customary impetuosity, he wrote the letter at once, and sent it to the post that night.

X.

ON the question of submitting himself to medical advice (which I now earnestly pressed upon him), Romaine was disposed to be equally unreasonable. But in this case, events declared themselves in my favour.

Lady Berrick's last reserves of strength had given way. She had been brought to London in a dying state while we were at Vange Abbey. Romaine was summoned to his aunt's bedside on the third day of our residence at the hotel, and was present at her death. The impression produced on his mind roused the better part of his nature.

He was more distrustful of himself, more accessible to persuasion than usual. In this gentler frame of mind he received a welcome visit from an old friend, to whom he was sincerely attached. The visit—of no great importance in itself—led, as I have since been informed, to very serious events in Romaine's later life. For this reason, I briefly relate what took place within my own hearing.

Lord Loring—well known in society as the head of an old English Catholic family, and the possessor of a magnificent gallery of pictures—was distressed by the change for the worse which he perceived in Romaine when he called at the hotel. I was present when they met, and rose to leave the room, feeling that the two friends might perhaps be embarrassed by the presence of a third

person. Romaine called me back. ‘Lord Loring ought to know what has happened to me,’ he said. ‘I have no heart to speak of it myself. Tell him everything, and if he agrees with you, I will submit to see the doctors.’ With those words, he left us together.

It is almost needless to say that Lord Loring did agree with me. He was himself disposed to think that the moral remedy, in Romaine’s case, might prove to be the best remedy.

‘With submission to what the doctors may decide,’ his lordship said, ‘the right thing to do, in my opinion, is to divert our friend’s mind from himself. I see a plain necessity for making a complete change in the solitary life that he has been leading for years past. Why shouldn’t he marry? A

woman's influence, by merely giving a new turn to his thoughts, might charm away that horrible voice which haunts him. Perhaps you think this a merely sentimental view of the case? Look at it practically, if you like, and you come to the same conclusion. With that fine estate—and with the fortune which he has now inherited from his aunt—it is his duty to marry. Don't you agree with me?'

'I agree most cordially. But I see serious difficulties in your lordship's way. Romaine dislikes society; and, as to marrying, his coldness towards women seems (so far as I can judge) to be one of the incurable defects of his character.'

Lord Loring smiled. 'My dear sir, nothing of that sort is incurable, if we can only find the right woman.'

The tone in which he spoke suggested to me that he had got ‘the right woman’—and I took the liberty of saying so. He at once acknowledged that I had guessed right.

‘Romaine is, as you say, a difficult subject to deal with,’ he resumed. ‘If I commit the slightest imprudence, I shall excite his suspicion—and there will be an end of my hope of being of service to him. I shall proceed carefully, I can tell you. Luckily, poor dear fellow, he is fond of pictures! It’s quite natural that I should ask him to see some recent additions to my gallery—isn’t it? There is the trap that I set! I have a sweet girl to tempt him, staying at my house, who is a little out of health and spirits herself. At the right moment, I shall send word upstairs. She may well happen to look in at the gallery (by the merest accident) just

at the time when Romaine is looking at my new pictures. The rest depends, of course, on the effect she produces. If you knew her, I believe you would agree with me that the experiment is worth trying.'

Not knowing the lady, I had little faith in the success of the experiment. No one, however, could doubt Lord Loring's admirable devotion to his friend—and with that I was fain to be content.

When Romaine returned to us, it was decided to submit his case to a consultation of physicians at the earliest possible moment. When Lord Loring took his departure, I accompanied him to the door of the hotel, perceiving that he wished to say a word more to me in private. He had, it seemed, decided on waiting for the result of the medical consultation before he tried the

effect of the young lady's attractions ; and he wished to caution me against speaking prematurely of visiting the picture gallery to our friend.

Not feeling particularly interested in these details of the worthy nobleman's little plot, I looked at his carriage, and privately admired the two splendid horses that drew it. The footman opened the door for his master, and I became aware, for the first time, that a gentleman had accompanied Lord Loring to the hotel, and had waited for him in the carriage. The gentleman bent forward, and looked up from a book that he was reading. To my astonishment, I recognised the elderly fat and cheerful priest who had shown such a knowledge of localities, and such an extraordinary interest in Vange Abbey !

It struck me as an odd coincidence that I should see the man again in London, so soon after I had met with him in Yorkshire. This was all I thought about it, at the time. If I had known then, what I know now, I might have dreamed, let us say, of throwing that priest into the lake at Vange, and might have reckoned the circumstance among the wisely-improved opportunities of my life.

To return to the serious interests of the present narrative, I may now announce that my evidence as an eye-witness of events has come to an end. The day after Lord Loring's visit, domestic troubles separated me, to my most sincere regret, from Romaine. I have only to add, that the foregoing narrative of personal experience has been written with a due sense of responsi-

bility, and that it may be depended on throughout as an exact statement of the truth.

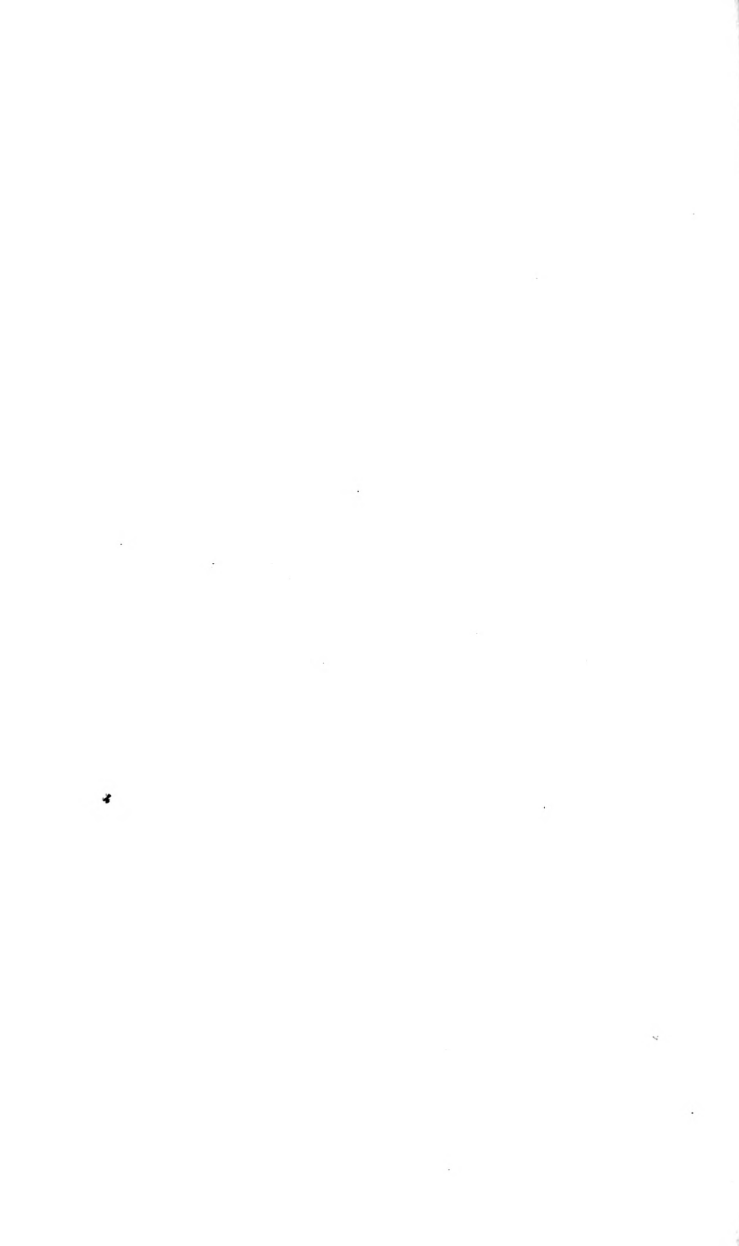
JOHN PHILIP HYND

(late Major, 110th Regiment).



THE STORY.

BOOK THE FIRST.



CHAPTER I.

THE CONFIDENCES.

IN an upper room of one of the palatial houses which are situated on the north side of Hyde Park, two ladies sat at breakfast, and gossiped over their tea.

The elder of the two was Lady Loring—still in the prime of life; possessed of the golden hair and the clear blue eyes, the delicately-florid complexion, and the freely developed figure, which are among the favourite attractions popularly associated with the beauty of Englishwomen. Her younger companion was the unknown lady admired by Major Hynd on the sea passage

from France to England. With hair and eyes of the darkest brown; with a pure pallor of complexion, only changing to a faint rose tint in moments of agitation; with a tall graceful figure, incompletely developed in substance and strength—she presented an almost complete contrast to Lady Loring. Two more opposite types of beauty it would have been hardly possible to place at the same table.

The servant brought in the letters of the morning. Lady Loring ran through her correspondence rapidly, pushed away the letters in a heap, and poured herself out a second cup of tea.

‘Nothing interesting this morning for me,’ she said. ‘Any news of your mother, Stella?’

The young lady handed an open letter

to her hostess, with a faint smile. ‘See for yourself, Adelaide,’ she answered, with the tender sweetness of tone which made her voice irresistibly charming—‘and tell me if there were ever two women so utterly unlike each other as my mother and myself.’

Lady Loring ran through the letter, as she had run through her own correspondence. ‘Never, dearest Stella, have I enjoyed myself as I do in this delightful country house,—twenty-seven at dinner every day, without including the neighbours—a little carpet dance every evening—we play billiards, and go into the smoking room—the hounds meet three times a week—all sorts of celebrities among the company, famous beauties included—such dresses! such conversation!—and serious duties, my

dear, not neglected—high church and choral service in the town on Sundays—recitations in the evening from *Paradise Lost*, by an amateur elocutionist—oh, you foolish, headstrong child! why did you make excuses and stay in London, when you might have accompanied me to this earthly Paradise?—are you really ill?—my love to Lady Loring—and of course, if you *are* ill, you must have medical advice—they ask after you so kindly here—the first dinner bell is ringing, before I have half done my letter—what *am* I to wear?—why is my daughter not here to advise me,’ &c., &c., &c.

‘There is time to change your mind and advise your mother,’ Lady Loring remarked with grave irony as she returned the letter.

‘Don’t even speak of it!’ said Stella. ‘I really know no life that I should not prefer to the life that my mother is enjoying at this moment. What should I have done, Adelaide, if you had not offered me a happy refuge in your house? My “earthly Paradise” is here, where I am allowed to dream away my time over my drawings and my books, and to resign myself to poor health and low spirits, without being dragged into society, and (worse still) threatened with that “medical advice” in which, when she isn’t threatened with it herself, my poor dear mother believes so implicitly. I wish you would hire me as your “companion,” and let me stay here for the rest of my life.’

Lady Loring’s bright face became grave while Stella was speaking.

‘My dear,’ she said kindly, ‘I know well

how you love retirement, and how differently you think and feel from other young women of your age. And I am far from forgetting what sad circumstances have encouraged the natural bent of your disposition. But, since you have been staying with me this time, I see something in you which my intimate knowledge of your character fails to explain. We have been friends since we were together at school—and, in those old days, we never had any secrets from each other. You are feeling some anxiety, or brooding over some sorrow, of which I know nothing. I don't ask for your confidence; I only tell you what I have noticed—and I say with all my heart, Stella, I am sorry for you.'

She rose, and, with intuitive delicacy, changed the subject. 'I am going out earlier than usual this morning,' she resumed.

‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ She laid her hand tenderly on Stella’s shoulder, waiting for the reply. Stella lifted the hand and kissed it with passionate fondness.

‘Don’t think me ungrateful,’ she said; ‘I am only ashamed.’ Her head sank on her bosom; she burst into tears.

Lady Loring waited by her in silence. She well knew the girl’s self-contained nature, always shrinking, except in moments of violent emotion, from the outward betrayal of its trials and its sufferings to others. The true depth of feeling which is marked by this inbred modesty is most frequently found in men. The few women who possess it are without the communicative consolations of the feminine heart. They are the noblest—and but too often the unhappiest of their sex.

‘Will you wait a little before you go out?’ Stella asked softly.

Lady Loring returned to the chair that she had left—hesitated for a moment—and then drew it nearer to Stella. ‘Shall I sit by you?’ she said.

‘Close by me. You spoke of our school days just now, Adelaide. There was some difference between us. Of all the girls, I was the youngest—and you were the eldest, or nearly the eldest, I think?’

‘Quite the eldest, my dear. There is a difference of ten years between us. But why do you go back to that?’

‘It’s only a recollection. My father was alive then. I was at first home-sick and frightened in the strange place, among the big girls. You used to let me hide my face

on your shoulder, and tell me stories. May I hide in the old way, and tell *my* story?’

She was now the calmest of the two. The elder woman turned a little pale, and looked down in silent anxiety at the darkly beautiful head that rested on her shoulder

‘After such an experience as mine has been,’ said Stella, ‘would you think it possible that I could ever again feel my heart troubled by a man—and that man a stranger?’

‘My dear! I think it quite possible. You are only now in your twenty-third year. You were innocent of all blame at that wretched bygone time which you ought never to speak of again. Love and be happy, Stella—if you can only find the man who is worthy of you. But you frighten me

when you speak of a stranger. Where did you meet with him?’

‘On our way back from Paris.’

‘Travelling in the same carriage with you?’

‘No—it was in crossing the Channel. There were few travellers in the steamboat, or I might never have noticed him.’

‘Did he speak to you?’

‘I don’t think he even looked at me.’

‘That doesn’t say much for his taste, Stella.’

‘You don’t understand. I mean, I have not explained myself properly. He was leaning on the arm of a friend; weak and worn and wasted, as I supposed, by some long and dreadful illness. There was an angelic sweetness in his face—such patience! such resignation! For Heaven’s

sake keep my secret. One hears of men falling in love with women at first sight. But a woman who looks at a man, and feels—oh, it's shameful! I could hardly take my eyes off him. If he had looked at me in return, I don't know what I should have done—I burn when I think of it. He was absorbed in his suffering and his sorrow. My last look at his beautiful face was on the pier, before they took me away. The perfect image of him has been in my heart ever since. In my dreams, I see him as plainly as I see you now. Don't despise me, Adelaide!'

'My dear, you interest me indescribably. Do you suppose he was in our rank of life? I mean, of course, did he look like a gentleman?'

'There could be no doubt of it.'

‘Do try to describe him, Stella. Was he tall and well dressed?’

‘Neither tall nor short—rather thin—quiet and graceful in all his movements—dressed plainly, in perfect taste. How can I describe him? When his friend brought him on board, he stood at the side of the vessel, looking out thoughtfully towards the sea. Such eyes I never saw before, Adelaide, in any human face—so divinely tender and sad—and the colour of them that dark violet blue, so uncommon and so beautiful—too beautiful for a man. I may say the same of his hair. I saw it completely. For a minute or two he removed his hat—his head was fevered, I think—and he let the sea breeze blow over it. The pure light brown of his hair was just warmed by a lovely reddish tinge. His beard was of the same

colour; short and curling, like the beards of the Roman heroes one sees in pictures. I shall never see him again—and it is best for me that I shall not. What can I hope from a man who never once noticed me? But I *should* like to hear that he had recovered his health and his tranquillity, and that his life was a happy one. It has been a comfort to me, Adelaide, to open my heart to you. I am getting bold enough to confess everything. Would you laugh at me, I wonder, if I——?’

She stopped. Her pale complexion softly glowed into colour; her grand dark eyes brightened—she looked her loveliest at that moment.

‘I am far more inclined, Stella, to cry over you than to laugh at you,’ said Lady Loring. ‘There is something, to my mind,

very sad about this adventure of yours. I wish I could find out who the man is. Even the best description of a person falls so short of the reality !’

‘ I thought of showing you something,’ Stella continued, ‘ which might help you to see him as I saw him. It’s only making one more acknowledgment of my own folly.’

‘ You don’t mean a portrait of him !’ Lady Loring exclaimed.

‘ The best that I could do from recollection,’ Stella answered sadly.

‘ Bring it here directly !’

Stella left the room and returned with a little drawing in pencil. The instant Lady Loring looked at it, she recognised Romaine, and started excitedly to her feet.

‘ You know him !’ cried Stella.

Lady Loring had placed herself in an

awkward position. Her husband had described to her his interview with Major Hynd, and had mentioned his project for bringing Romaine and Stella together, after first exacting a promise of the strictest secrecy from his wife. She felt herself bound—doubly bound, after what she had now discovered—to respect the confidence placed in her ; and this at the time when she had betrayed herself to Stella ! With a woman's feline fineness of perception, in all cases of subterfuge and concealment, she picked a part of the truth out of the whole, and answered harmlessly without a moment's hesitation.

‘I have certainly seen him,’ she said—
‘probably at some party. But I see so many people, and I go to so many places, that I must ask for time to consult my

memory. My husband might help me, if you don't object to my asking him,' she added slyly.

Stella snatched the drawing away from her, in terror. 'You don't mean that you will tell Lord Loring?' she said.

'My dear child! how can you be so foolish? Can't I show him the drawing without mentioning who it was done by? His memory is a much better one than mine. If I say to him, "Where did we meet that man?"—he may tell me at once—he may even remember the name. Of course, if you like to be kept in suspense, you have only to say so. It rests with you to decide.'

Poor Stella gave way directly. She returned the drawing, and affectionately kissed her artful friend. Having now

secured the means of consulting her husband without exciting suspicion, Lady Loring left the room.

At that time in the morning, Lord Loring was generally to be found either in the library or the picture gallery. His wife tried the library first.

On entering the room, she found but one person in it—not the person of whom she was in search. There, buttoned up in his long frock coat, and surrounded by books of all sorts and sizes, sat the plump elderly priest who had been the especial object of Major Hynd's aversion.

‘I beg your pardon, Father Benwell,’ said Lady Loring; ‘I hope I don’t interrupt your studies?’

Father Benwell rose and bowed, with a pleasant paternal smile. ‘I am only trying

to organise an improved arrangement of the library,' he said simply. 'Books are companionable creatures—members, as it were, of his family, to a lonely old priest like myself. Can I be of any service to your ladyship?'

'Thank you, Father. If you can kindly tell me where Lord Loring is——'

'To be sure! His lordship was here five minutes since—he is now in the picture gallery. Pray permit me!'

With a remarkably light and easy step for a man of his age and size, he advanced to the further end of the library, and opened a door which led into the gallery.

'Lord Loring is among the pictures,' he announced. 'And alone.' He laid a certain emphasis on the last word, which might or might not (in the case of a spiritual

director of the household) invite a word of explanation.

Lady Loring merely said, 'Just what I wanted; thank you once more, Father Benwell'—and passed into the picture gallery.

Left by himself again in the library, the priest walked slowly to and fro, thinking. His latent power and resolution began to show themselves darkly in his face. A skilled observer would now have seen plainly revealed in him the habit of command, and the capacity for insisting on his right to be obeyed. From head to foot, Father Benwell was one of those valuable soldiers of the Church who acknowledge no defeat, and who improve every victory.

After a while, he returned to the table at which he had been writing when Lady

Loring entered the room. An unfinished letter lay open on the desk. He took up his pen and completed it in these words : ‘I have therefore decided on trusting this serious matter in the hands of Arthur Penrose. I know he is young—but we have to set against the drawback of his youth, the counter-merits of his incorruptible honesty and his true religious zeal. No better man is just now within my reach—and there is no time to lose. Romaine has recently inherited a large increase of fortune. He will be the object of the basest conspiracies—conspiracies of men to win his money, and (worse still) of women to marry him. Even these contemptible efforts may be obstacles in the way of our righteous purpose, unless we are first in the field. Penrose left Oxford last week. I expect him here

this morning, by my invitation. When I have given him the necessary instructions, and have found the means of favourably introducing him to Romaine, I shall have the honour of forwarding a statement of our prospects so far.'

Having signed these lines, he addressed the letter to 'The Reverend the Secretary, Society of Jesus, Rome.' As he closed and sealed the envelope, a servant opened the door communicating with the hall, and announced:

'Mr. Arthur Penrose.'

CHAPTER II.

THE JESUITS.

FATHER BENWELL rose, and welcomed the visitor with his paternal smile. 'I am heartily glad to see you,' he said—and held out his hand with a becoming mixture of dignity and cordiality. Penrose lifted the offered hand respectfully to his lips. As one of the 'Provincials' of the Order, Father Benwell occupied a high place among the English Jesuits. He was accustomed to acts of homage offered by his younger brethren to their spiritual chief. 'I fear you are not well,' he proceeded gently. 'Your hand is feverish, Arthur.'

‘Thank you, Father—I am as well as usual.’

‘Depression of spirits, perhaps?’ Father Benwell persisted.

Penrose admitted it with a passing smile. ‘My spirits are never very lively,’ he said.

Father Benwell shook his head in gentle disapproval of a depressed state of spirits in a young man. ‘This must be corrected,’ he remarked. ‘Cultivate cheerfulness, Arthur. I am myself, thank God, a naturally cheerful man. My mind reflects, in some degree (and reflects gratefully), the brightness and beauty which are part of the great scheme of creation. A similar disposition is to be cultivated—I know instances of it in my own experience. Add one more instance, and you will really gratify me. In its seasons of

rejoicing, our Church is eminently cheerful. Shall I add another encouragement? A great trust is about to be placed in you. Be socially agreeable, or you will fail to justify the trust. This is Father Benwell's little sermon. I think it has a merit, Arthur—it is a sermon soon over.'

Penrose looked up at his superior, eager to hear more.

He was a very young man. His large, thoughtful, well-opened grey eyes, and his habitual refinement and modesty of manner, gave a certain attraction to his personal appearance, of which it stood in some need. In stature he was little and lean; his hair had become prematurely thin over his broad forehead; there were hollows already in his cheeks, and marks on either side of his thin delicate lips. He looked like a person who

had passed many miserable hours in needlessly despairing of himself and his prospects. With all this, there was something in him so irresistibly truthful and sincere—so suggestive, even where he might be wrong, of a purely conscientious belief in his own errors—that he attached people to him without an effort, and often without being aware of it himself. What would his friends have said if they had been told that the religious enthusiasm of this gentle, self-distrustful, melancholy man, might, in its very innocence of suspicion and self-seeking, be perverted to dangerous uses in unscrupulous hands? His friends would, one and all, have received the scandalous assertion with contempt; and Penrose himself, if he had heard of it, might have failed to control his temper for the first time in his life.

‘May I ask a question, without giving offence?’ he said, timidly.

Father Benwell took his hand. ‘My dear Arthur, let us open our minds to each other without reserve. What is your question?’

‘You have spoken, Father, of a great trust that is about to be placed in me.’

‘Yes. You are anxious, no doubt, to hear what it is?’

‘I am anxious to know, in the first place, if it requires me to go back to Oxford.’

Father Benwell dropped his young friend’s hand. ‘Do you dislike Oxford?’ he asked, observing Penrose attentively.

‘Bear with me, Father, if I speak too confidently. I dislike the deception which has obliged me to conceal that I am a Catholic and a priest.’

Father Benwell set this little difficulty right, with the air of a man who could make benevolent allowance for unreasonable scruples. 'I think, Arthur, you forget two important considerations,' he said. 'In the first place, you have a dispensation from your superiors, which absolves you of all responsibility in respect of the concealment that you have practised. In the second place, we could only obtain information of the progress which our Church is silently making at the University by employing you in the capacity of—let me say, an independent observer. However, if it will contribute to your ease of mind, I see no objection to informing you that you will *not* be instructed to return to Oxford. Do I relieve you?'

There could be no question of it. Pen-

rose breathed more freely, in every sense of the word.

‘At the same time,’ Father Benwell continued, ‘let us not misunderstand each other. In the new sphere of action which we design for you, you will not only be at liberty to acknowledge that you are a Catholic, it will be absolutely necessary that you should do so. But you will continue to wear the ordinary dress of an English gentleman, and to preserve the strictest secrecy on the subject of your admission to the priesthood, until you are further advised by myself. Now, dear Arthur, read that paper. It is the necessary preface to all that I have yet to say to you.’

The ‘paper’ contained a few pages of manuscript, relating the early history of Vange Abbey, in the days of the monks,

and the circumstances under which the property was confiscated to lay uses in the time of Henry the Eighth. Penrose handed back the little narrative, vehemently expressing his sympathy with the monks, and his detestation of the King.

‘Compose yourself, Arthur,’ said Father Benwell, smiling pleasantly. ‘We don’t mean to allow Henry the Eighth to have it all his own way for ever.’

Penrose looked at his superior in blank bewilderment. His superior withheld any further information for the present.

‘Everything in its turn,’ the discreet Father resumed; ‘the turn of explanation has not come yet. I have something else to show you first. One of the most interesting relics in England. Look here.’

He unlocked a flat mahogany box, and

displayed to view some writings on vellum, evidently of great age.

‘You have had a little sermon already,’ he said. ‘You shall have a little story now. No doubt you have heard of Newstead Abbey—famous among the readers of poetry as the residence of Byron? King Henry treated Newstead exactly as he treated Vange Abbey! Many years since, the lake at Newstead was dragged, and the brass eagle which had served as the lectern in the old church was rescued from the waters in which it had lain for centuries. A secret receptacle was discovered in the body of the eagle, and the ancient title-deeds of the Abbey were found in it. The monks had taken that method of concealing the legal proof of their rights and privileges, in the hope—a vain hope, I need hardly say—that

a time might come when Justice would restore to them the property of which they had been robbed. Only last summer, one of our bishops, administering a northern diocese, spoke of these circumstances to a devout Catholic friend, and said he thought it possible that the precaution taken by the monks at Newstead might also have been taken by the monks at Vange. The friend, I should tell you, was an enthusiast. Saying nothing to the bishop (whose position and responsibilities he was bound to respect), he took into his confidence persons whom he could trust. One night—in the absence of the present proprietor, or I should rather say, the present usurper, of the estate—the lake at Vange was privately dragged, with a result that proved the bishop's conjecture to be right. Read those valuable documents.

Knowing your strict sense of honour, my son, and your admirable tenderness of conscience, I wish you to be satisfied of the title of the Church to the lands of Vange, by evidence which is beyond dispute.'

With this little preface, he waited while Penrose read the title-deeds. 'Any doubt on your mind?' he asked, when the reading had come to an end.

'Not the shadow of a doubt.'

'Is the Church's right to the property clear?

'As clear, Father, as words can make it.'

'Very good. We will look up the documents. Arbitrary confiscation, Arthur, even on the part of a king, cannot override the law. What the Church once lawfully possessed, the Church has a right to recover. Any doubt about that in your mind?'

‘Only the doubt of *how* the Church can recover. Is there anything in this particular case to be hoped from the law?’

‘Nothing whatever.’

‘And yet, Father, you speak as if you saw some prospect of the restitution of the property. By what means can the restitution be made?’

‘By peaceful and worthy means,’ Father Benwell answered. ‘By honourable restoration of the confiscated property to the Church, on the part of the person who is now in possession of it.’

Penrose was surprised and interested. ‘Is the person a Catholic?’ he asked, eagerly.

‘Not yet.’ Father Benwell laid a strong emphasis on those two little words. ‘His fat fingers drummed restlessly on the table; his

vigilant eyes rested expectantly on Penrose. 'Surely you understand me, Arthur?' he added, after an interval.

The colour rose slowly in the worn face of Penrose. 'I am afraid to understand you,' he said.

'Why?'

'I am not sure that it is my better sense which understands. I am afraid, Father, it may be my vanity and presumption.'

Father Benwell leaned back luxuriously in his chair. 'I like that modesty,' he said, with a relishing smack of his lips as if modesty was as good as a meal to him. 'There is power of the right sort, Arthur, hidden under the diffidence that does you honour. I am more than ever satisfied that I have been right in reporting you as worthy of this most serious trust. I believe the con-

version of the owner of Vange Abbey is—in your hands—no more than a matter of time.’

‘ May I ask what his name is ? ’

‘ Certainly. His name is Lewis Romaine.’

‘ When do you introduce me to him ? ’

‘ Impossible to say. I have not yet been introduced myself.’

‘ You don’t know Mr. Romaine ? ’

‘ I have never even seen him.’

These discouraging replies were made with the perfect composure of a man who saw his way clearly before him. Sinking from one depth of perplexity to another, Penrose ventured on putting one last question. ‘ How am I to approach Mr. Romaine ? ’ he asked.

‘ I can only answer that, Arthur, by

admitting you still further into my confidence. It is disagreeable to me,' said the reverend gentleman, with the most becoming humility, 'to speak of myself. But it must be done. Shall we have a little coffee to help us through the coming extract from Father Benwell's autobiography? Don't look so serious, my son! When the occasion justifies it, let us take life lightly.' He rang the bell and ordered the coffee, as if he was the master of the house. The servant treated him with the most scrupulous respect. He hummed a little tune, and talked at intervals of the weather, while they were waiting. 'Plenty of sugar, Arthur?' he inquired, when the coffee was brought in. 'No! Even in trifles, I should have been glad to feel that there was perfect sympathy between us. I like plenty of sugar myself.'

Having sweetened his coffee with the closest attention to the process, he was at liberty to enlighten his young friend. He did it so easily and so cheerfully that a far less patient man than Penrose would have listened to him with interest.

CHAPTER III.

THE INTRODUCTION TO ROMAYNE.

‘EXCEPTING my employment here in the library,’ Father Benwell began, ‘and some interesting conversation with Lord Loring, to which I shall presently allude, I am almost as great a stranger in this house, Arthur, as yourself. When the object which we now have in view was first taken seriously into consideration, I had the honour of being personally acquainted with Lord Loring. I was also aware that he was an intimate and trusted friend of Romaine. Under these circumstances, his lordship presented himself to our point of view as a means of approach-

ing the owner of Vange Abbey without exciting distrust. I was charged accordingly with the duty of establishing myself on terms of intimacy in this house. By way of making room for me, the spiritual director of Lord and Lady Loring was removed to a cure of souls in Ireland. And here I am in his place! By-the-way, don't treat me (when we are in the presence of visitors) with any special marks of respect. I am not Provincial of our Order in Lord Loring's house—I am one of the inferior clergy.'

Penrose looked at him with admiration. 'It is a great sacrifice to make, Father, in your position and at your age.'

'Not at all, Arthur. A position of authority involves certain temptations to pride. I feel this change as a lesson in humility which is good for me. For example, Lady

Loring (as I can plainly see) dislikes and distrusts me. Then, again, a young lady has recently arrived here on a visit. She is a Protestant, with all the prejudices incident to that way of thinking—avoids me so carefully, poor soul, that I have never seen her yet. These rebuffs are wholesome reminders of his fallible human nature, to a man who has occupied a place of high trust and command. Besides, there have been obstacles in my way which have had an excellent effect in rousing my energies. How do you feel, Arthur, when you encounter obstacles? ’

‘I do my best to remove them, Father. But I am sometimes conscious of a sense of discouragement.’

‘Curious,’ said Father Benwell. ‘I am only conscious, myself, of a sense of impatience. What right has an obstacle to get in *my* way?’

—that is how I look at it. For example, the first thing I heard, when I came here, was that Romaine had left England. My introduction to him was indefinitely delayed: I had to look to Lord Loring for all the information I wanted relating to the man and his habits. There was another obstacle! Not living in the house, I was obliged to find an excuse for being constantly on the spot, ready to take advantage of his lordship's leisure moments for conversation. I sat down in this room, and I said to myself, 'Before I get up again, I mean to brush these impertinent obstacles out of my way!' The state of the books suggested the idea of which I was in search. Before I left the house, I was charged with the re-arrangement of the library. From that moment I came and went as often as I liked. Whenever Lord

Loring was disposed for a little talk, there I was, to lead the talk in the right direction. And what is the result? On the first occasion when Romaine presents himself, I can place you in a position to become his daily companion. All due, Arthur, in the first instance, to my impatience of obstacles. Amusing, isn't it?'

Penrose was perhaps deficient in the sense of humour. Instead of being amused, he appeared to be anxious for more information.

'In what capacity am I to be Mr. Romaine's companion?' he asked.

Father Benwell poured himself out another cup of coffee.

'Suppose I tell you first,' he suggested, 'how circumstances present Romaine to us as a promising subject for conversion.'

He is young ; still a single man ; not compromised by any illicit connection ; romantic, sensitive, highly cultivated. No near relations are alive to influence him ; and, to my certain knowledge, his estate is not entailed. He has devoted himself for years past to books, and is collecting materials for a work of immense research, on the Origin of Religions. Some great sorrow or remorse—Lord Loring did not mention what it was—has told seriously on his nervous system, already injured by night study. Add to this, that he is now within our reach. He has lately returned to London, and is living quite alone at a private hotel. For some reason which I am not acquainted with, he keeps away from Vange Abbey—the very place, as I should have thought, for a studious man.’

Penrose began to be interested. 'Have you been to the Abbey?' he said.

'I made a little excursion to that part of Yorkshire, Arthur, not long since. A very pleasant trip—apart from the painful associations connected with the ruin and profanation of a sacred place. There is no doubt about the revenues. I know the value of that productive part of the estate which stretches southward, away from the barren region round the house. Let us return for a moment to Romaine, and to your position as his future companion. He has had his books sent to him from Vange, and has persuaded himself that continued study is the one remedy for his troubles, whatever they may be. At Lord Loring's suggestion, a consultation of physicians was held on his case the other day.'

‘Is he so ill as that!’ Penrose exclaimed.

‘So it appears,’ Father Benwell replied. ‘Lord Loring is mysteriously silent about the illness. One result of the consultation I extracted from him, in which you are interested. The doctors protested against his employing himself on his proposed work. He was too obstinate to listen to them. There was but one concession that they could gain from him—he consented to spare himself, in some small degree, by employing an amanuensis. It was left to Lord Loring to find the man. I was consulted by his lordship; I was even invited to undertake the duty myself. Each one in his proper sphere, my son! The person who converts Romaine must be young enough and pliable enough to be his friend and companion. Your part is there, Arthur

—you are the future amanuensis. How does the prospect strike you now?’

‘I beg your pardon, Father! I fear I am unworthy of the confidence which is placed in me.’

‘In what way?’

Penrose answered with unfeigned humility.

‘I am afraid I may fail to justify your belief in me,’ he said, ‘unless I can really feel that I am converting Mr. Romaine for his own soul’s sake. However righteous the cause may be, I cannot find, in the restitution of the Church property, a sufficient motive for persuading him to change his religious faith. There is something so serious in the responsibility which you lay on me, that I shall sink under the burden unless my whole heart is in the work. If I feel attracted

towards Mr. Romaine when I first see him ; if he wins upon me, little by little, until I love him like a brother — then, indeed, I can promise that his conversion shall be the dearest object of my life. But if there is not this intimate sympathy between us—forgive me if I say it plainly—I implore you to pass me over, and to commit the task to the hands of another man.’

His voice trembled ; his eyes moistened. Father Benwell handled his young friend’s rising emotion with the dexterity of a skilled angler humouring the struggles of a lively fish.

‘ Good Arthur ! ’ he said. ‘ I see much — too much, dear boy — of self-seeking people. It is as refreshing to me to hear you, as a draught of water to a thirsty man. At the same time, let me suggest that you are

innocently raising difficulties, where no difficulties exist. I have already mentioned as one of the necessities of the case that you and Romaine should be friends. How can that be, unless there is precisely that sympathy between you which you have so well described? I am a sanguine man, and I believe you will like each other. Wait till you see him.'

As the words passed his lips, the door that led to the picture gallery was opened. Lord Loring entered the library.

He looked quickly round him—apparently in search of some person who might, perhaps, be found in the room. A shade of annoyance showed itself in his face, and disappeared again, as he bowed to the two Jesuits.

'Don't let me disturb you,' he said,

looking at Penrose. 'Is this the gentleman who is to assist Mr. Romaine?'

Father Benwell presented his young friend. 'Arthur Penrose, my lord. I ventured to suggest that he should call here to-day, in case you wished to put any questions to him.'

'Quite needless, after your recommendation,' Lord Loring answered, graciously. 'Mr. Penrose could not have come here at a more appropriate time. As it happens, Mr. Romaine has paid us a visit to-day—he is now in the picture gallery.'

The priests looked at each other. Lord Loring left them as he spoke. He walked to the opposite door of the library—opened it—glanced round the hall, and at the stairs—and returned again, with the passing expression of annoyance visible once more.

‘Come with me to the gallery, gentlemen,’ he said; ‘I shall be happy to introduce you to Mr. Romaine.’

Penrose accepted the proposal. Father Benwell pointed with a smile to the books scattered about him. ‘With permission, I will follow your lordship,’ he said.

‘Who was my lord looking for?’ That was the question in Father Benwell’s mind, while he put some of the books away on the shelves, and collected the scattered papers on the table, relating to his correspondence with Rome. It had become a habit of his life to be suspicious of any circumstances occurring within his range of observation, for which he was unable to account. He might have felt some stronger emotion, on this occasion, if he had known that the conspiracy in the library to con-

vert Romaine was matched by the conspiracy in the picture gallery to marry him.

Lady Loring's narrative of the conversation which had taken place between Stella and herself had encouraged her husband to try his proposed experiment without delay. 'I shall send a letter at once to Romaine's hotel,' he said.

'Inviting him to come here to-day?' her ladyship inquired.

'Yes. I shall say I particularly wish to consult him about a picture. Are we to prepare Stella to see him? or would it be better to let the meeting take her by surprise?'

'Certainly not!' said Lady Loring. 'With her sensitive disposition, I am afraid of taking Stella by surprise. Let me only

tell her that Romaine is the original of her portrait, and that he is likely to call on you to see the picture to-day—and leave the rest to me.’

— Lady Loring’s suggestion was immediately carried out. In the first fervour of her agitation, Stella had declared that her courage was not equal to a meeting with Romaine on that day. Becoming more composed, she yielded to Lady Loring’s persuasion so far as to promise that she would at least make the attempt to follow her friend to the gallery. ‘If I go down with you,’ she said, ‘it will look as if we had arranged the thing between us. I can’t bear even to think of that. Let me look in by myself, as if it was by accident.’ Consenting to this arrangement, Lady Loring had proceeded alone to the gallery, when Romaine’s

visit was announced. The minutes passed, and Stella did not appear. It was quite possible that she might shrink from openly presenting herself at the main entrance to the gallery, and might prefer—especially if she was not aware of the priest's presence in the room—to slip in quietly by the library door. Failing to find her, on putting this idea to the test, Lord Loring had discovered Penrose, and had so hastened the introduction of the younger of the two Jesuits to Romaine.

Having gathered his papers together, Father Benwell crossed the library to the deep bow-window which lighted the room, and opened his despatch-box, standing on a small table in the recess. Placed in this position, he was invisible to any person

entering the room by the hall door. He had secured his papers in the despatch-box, and had just closed and locked it, when he heard the door cautiously opened.

The instant afterwards the rustling of a woman's dress over the carpet caught his ear. Other men might have walked out of the recess and shown themselves. Father Benwell stayed where he was, and waited until the lady crossed his range of view.

The priest observed with cold attention her darkly-beautiful eyes and hair, her quickly-changing colour, her modest grace of movement. Slowly, and in evident agitation, she advanced to the door of the picture gallery—and paused, as if she was afraid to open it. Father Benwell heard her sigh to herself softly, ‘Oh, how shall I meet him?’ She turned aside to the looking-

glass over the fire-place. The reflection of her charming face seemed to rouse her courage. She retraced her steps, and timidly opened the door. Lord Loring must have been close by at the moment. His voice immediately made itself heard in the library.

‘Come in, Stella—come in! Here is a new picture for you to see; and a friend whom I want to present to you, who must be your friend too—Mr. Lewis Romaine.’

The door was closed again. Father Benwell stood still as a statue in the recess, with his head down, deep in thought. After awhile he roused himself, and rapidly returned to the writing table. With a roughness strangely unlike his customary deliberation of movement, he snatched a sheet of paper out of the case, and, frowning heavily, wrote these lines on it:—‘Since my letter

was sealed, I have made a discovery which must be communicated without the loss of a post. I greatly fear there may be a woman in our way. Trust me to combat this obstacle as I have combated other obstacles. In the meantime, the work goes on. Penrose has received his first instructions, and has to-day been presented to Romaine.'

He addressed this letter to Rome, as he had addressed the letter preceding it. 'Now for the woman!' he said to himself—and opened the door of the picture gallery.

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER BENWELL HITS.

ART has its trials as well as its triumphs. It is powerless to assert itself against the sordid interests of everyday life. The greatest book ever written, the finest picture ever painted, appeals in vain to minds pre-occupied by selfish and secret cares. On entering Lord Loring's gallery, Father Benwell found but one person who was not looking at the pictures under false pretences.

Innocent of all suspicion of the conflicting interests whose struggle now centred in himself, Romaine was carefully studying the picture which had been made the pretext for

inviting him to the house. He had bowed to Stella, with a tranquil admiration of her beauty; he had shaken hands with Penrose, and had said some kind words to his future secretary—and then he had turned to the picture, as if Stella and Penrose had ceased from that moment to occupy his mind.

‘In your place,’ he said quietly to Lord Loring, ‘I should not buy this work.’

‘Why not?’

‘It seems to me to have the serious defect of the modern English school of painting. A total want of thought in the rendering of the subject, disguised under dexterous technical tricks of the brush. When you have seen one of that man’s pictures, you have seen all. He manufactures—he doesn’t paint.’

Father Benwell came in while Romaine was speaking. He went through the ceremonies of introduction to the master of Vange Abbey with perfect politeness, but a little absently. His mind was bent on putting his suspicion of Stella to the test of confirmation. Not waiting to be presented, he turned to her with the air of fatherly interest and chastened admiration which he well knew how to assume in his intercourse with women.

‘May I ask if you agree with Mr. Romaine’s estimate of the picture?’ he said, in his gentlest tones.

She had heard of him, and of his position in the house. It was quite needless for Lady Loring to whisper to her, ‘Father Benwell, my dear!’ Her antipathy identified him as readily as her sympathy might

have identified a man who had produced a favourable impression on her. 'I have no pretension to be a critic,' she answered, with frigid politeness. 'I only know what I personally like or dislike.'

The reply exactly answered Father Benwell's purpose. It diverted Romaine's attention from the picture to Stella. The priest had secured his opportunity of reading their faces while they were looking at each other.

'I think you have just stated the true motive for all criticism,' Romaine said to Stella. 'Whether we only express our opinions of pictures or books in the course of conversation, or whether we assert them at full length, with all the authority of print, we are really speaking, in either case, of what personally pleases or repels us. My

poor opinion of that picture means that it says nothing to Me. Does it say anything to You?’

He smiled gently as he put the question to her, but there was no betrayal of emotion in his eyes or in his voice. Relieved of anxiety, so far as Romaine was concerned, Father Benwell looked at Stella.

Steadily as she controlled herself, the confession of her heart's secret found its way into her face. The coldly-composed expression which had confronted the priest when she spoke to him, melted away softly under the influence of Romaine's voice and Romaine's look. Without any positive change of colour, her delicate skin glowed faintly, as if it felt some animating inner warmth. Her eyes and lips brightened with a new vitality; her frail elegant figure seemed insensibly to

strengthen and expand, like the leaf of a flower under a favouring sunny air. When she answered Romaine (agreeing with him, it is needless to say), there was a tender persuasiveness in her tones, shyly inviting him still to speak to her and still to look at her, which would in itself have told Father Benwell the truth, even if he had not been in a position to see her face. Confirmed in his doubts of her, he looked, with concealed suspicion, at Lady Loring next. Sympathy with Stella was undisguisedly expressed to him in the honest blue eyes of Stella's faithful friend.

The discussion on the subject of the unfortunate picture was resumed by Lord Loring, who thought the opinions of Romaine and Stella needlessly severe. Lady Loring, as usual, agreed with her husband.

While the general attention was occupied in this way, Father Benwell said a word to Penrose—thus far, a silent listener to the discourse on Art.

‘Have you seen the famous portrait of the first Lady Loring, by Gainsborough?’ he asked. Without waiting for a reply, he took Penrose by the arm, and led him away to the picture—which had the additional merit, under present circumstances, of hanging at the other end of the gallery.

‘How do you like Romaine?’ Father Benwell put the question in low peremptory tones, evidently impatient for a reply.

‘He interests me already,’ said Penrose. ‘He looks so ill and so sad, and he spoke to me so kindly——’

‘In short,’ Father Benwell interposed, ‘Romaine has produced a favourable im-

pression on you. Let us get on to the next thing. You must produce a favourable impression on Romaine.'

Penrose sighed. 'With the best will to make myself agreeable to people whom I like,' he said, 'I don't always succeed. They used to tell me at Oxford that I was shy—and I am afraid that is against me. I wish I possessed some of your social advantages, Father!'

'Leave it to me, son! Are they still talking about the picture?'

'Yes.'

'I have something more to say to you. Have you noticed the young lady?'

'I thought her beautiful—but she looks a little cold.'

Father Benwell smiled. 'When you are as old as I am,' he said, 'you will not believe

in appearances where women are concerned. Do you know what *I* think of her? Beautiful, if you like—and dangerous as well.’

‘Dangerous! In what way?’

‘This is for your private ear, Arthur. She is in love with Romaine. Wait a minute! And Lady Loring—unless I am entirely mistaken in what I observed—knows it and favours it. The beautiful Stella may be the destruction of all our hopes, unless we keep Romaine out of her way.’

These words were whispered with an earnestness and agitation which surprised Penrose. His superior’s equanimity was not easily overthrown. ‘Are you sure, Father, of what you say?’ he asked.

‘I am quite sure—or I should not have spoken.’

‘Do you think Mr. Romaine returns the feeling?’

‘Not yet, luckily. You must use your first friendly influence over him—what is her name? Her surname, I mean.’

‘Eyre-court. Miss Stella Eyre-court.’

‘Very well. You must use your influence (when you are quite sure that it *is* an influence) to keep Mr. Romaine away from Miss Eyre-court.’

Penrose looked embarrassed. ‘I am afraid I should hardly know how to do that,’ he said. ‘But I should naturally, as his assistant, encourage him to keep to his studies.’

Whatever Arthur’s superior might privately think of Arthur’s reply, he received it with outward indulgence. ‘That will come to the same thing,’ he said. ‘Besides, when

I get the information I want—this is strictly between ourselves—I may be of some use in placing obstacles in the lady's way.'

Penrose started. 'Information!' he repeated. 'What information?'

'Tell me something before I answer you,' said Father Benwell. 'How old do you take Miss Eyrecourt to be?'

'I am not a good judge in such matters. Between twenty and twenty-five, perhaps?'

'We will take her age at that estimate, Arthur. In former years, I have had opportunities of studying women's characters in the confessional. Can you guess what my experience tells me of Miss Eyrecourt?'

'No, indeed!'

'A lady is not in love for the first time when she is between twenty and twenty-

five years old—that is my experience,’ said Father Benwell. ‘If I can find a person capable of informing me, I may make some valuable discoveries in the earlier history of Miss Eyrecourt’s life. No more, now. We had better return to our friends.’

CHAPTER V.

FATHER BENWELL MISSES.

THE group before the picture which had been the subject of dispute was broken up. In one part of the gallery, Lady Loring and Stella were whispering together on a sofa. In another part, Lord Loring was speaking privately to Romaine.

‘Do you think you will like Mr. Penrose?’ his lordship asked.

‘Yes—so far as I can tell at present. He seems to be modest and intelligent.’

‘You are looking ill, my dear Romaine. Have you again heard the voice that haunts you?’

Romayne answered with evident reluctance. 'I don't know why,' he said—'but the dread of hearing it again has oppressed me all this morning. To tell you the truth, I came here in the hope that the change might relieve me.'

'Has it done so?'

'Yes—thus far.'

'Doesn't that suggest, my friend, that a greater change might be of use to you?'

'Don't ask me about it, Loring! I can go through my ordeal—but I hate speaking of it.'

'Let us speak of something else then,' said Lord Loring. 'What do you think of Miss Eyrecourt?'

'A very striking face; full of expression and character. Leonardo would have painted a noble portrait of her. But there

is something in her manner——’ He stopped, unwilling or unable to finish the sentence.

‘Something you don’t like?’ Lord Loring suggested.

‘No; something I don’t quite understand. One doesn’t expect to find any embarrassment in the manner of a well-bred woman. And yet she seemed to be embarrassed when she spoke to me. Perhaps I produced an unfortunate impression on her.’

Lord Loring laughed. ‘In any man but you, Romaine, I should call that affectation.’

‘Why?’ Romaine asked sharply.

Lord Loring looked unfeignedly surprised. ‘My dear fellow, do you really think you are the sort of man who impresses

a woman unfavourably at first sight? For once in your life, indulge in the amiable weakness of doing yourself justice—and find a better reason for Miss Eyrecourt's embarrassment.'

For the first time since he and his friend had been talking together, Romaine turned towards Stella. He innocently caught her in the act of looking at him. A younger woman, or a woman of weaker character, would have looked away again. Stella's noble head drooped; her eyes sank slowly, until they rested on her long white hands crossed upon her lap. For a moment more Romaine looked at her with steady attention. He roused himself, and spoke to Lord Loring in lowered tones.

'Have you known Miss Eyrecourt for a long time?'

‘She is my wife’s oldest and dearest friend. I think, Romaine, you would feel interested in Stella, if you saw more of her.’

Romaine bowed in silent submission to Lord Loring’s prophetic remark. ‘Let us look at the pictures,’ he said quietly.

As he moved down the gallery, the two priests met him. Father Benwell saw his opportunity of helping Penrose to produce a favourable impression.

‘Forgive the curiosity of an old student, Mr. Romaine,’ he said in his pleasant cheerful way. ‘Lord Loring tells me you have sent to the country for your books. Do you find a London hotel favourable to study?’

‘It is a very quiet hotel,’ Romaine answered; ‘and the people know my ways.’ He turned to Arthur. ‘I have my own set

of rooms, Mr. Penrose,' he continued—' with a room at your disposal. I used to enjoy the solitude of my house in the country. My tastes have lately changed—there are times now when I want to see the life in the streets, as a relief. Though we are in an hotel, I can promise that you will not be troubled by interruptions, when you kindly lend me the use of your pen.'

Father Benwell answered before Penrose could speak. 'You may perhaps find my young friend's memory of some use to you, Mr. Romaine, as well as his pen. Penrose has studied in the Vatican Library. If your reading leads you that way, he knows more than most men of the rare old manuscripts which treat of the early history of Christianity.'

This delicately managed reference to the

projected work on 'The Origin of Religions' produced its effect.

'I should like very much, Mr. Penrose, to speak to you about those manuscripts,' Romaine said. 'Copies of some of them may perhaps be in the British Museum. Is it asking too much to inquire if you are disengaged this morning?'

'I am entirely at your service, Mr. Romaine.'

'If you will kindly call at my hotel in an hour's time, I shall have looked over my notes, and shall be ready for you with a list of titles and dates. There is the address.'

With those words, he advanced to take his leave of Lady Loring and Stella.

Father Benwell was a man possessed of extraordinary power of foresight—but he was not infallible. Seeing that Romaine

was on the point of leaving the house, and feeling that he had paved the way successfully for Romaine's amanuensis, he too readily assumed that there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in the gallery. Moreover, the interval before Penrose called at the hotel might be usefully filled up by some wise words of advice, relating to the religious uses to which he might turn his intercourse with his employer. Making one of his ready and plausible excuses, he accordingly returned with Penrose to the library—and so committed (as he himself discovered at a later time) one of the few mistakes in the long record of his life.

In the meanwhile, Romaine was not permitted to bring his visit to a conclusion without hospitable remonstrance on the part

of Lady Loring. She felt for Stella, with a woman's enthusiastic devotion to the interests of true love; and she had firmly resolved that a matter so trifling as the cultivation of Romaine's mind should not be allowed to stand in the way of the far more important enterprise of opening his heart to the influence of the sex.

‘Stay, and lunch with us,’ she said, when he held out his hand to bid her good-bye.

‘Thank you, Lady Loring, I never take lunch.’

‘Well, then, come and dine with us—no party: only ourselves. To-morrow, and next day, we are disengaged. Which day shall it be?’

Romaine still resisted. ‘You are very kind. In my state of health, I am unwilling

to make engagements which I may not be able to keep.'

Lady Loring was just as resolute on her side. She appealed to Stella. 'Mr. Romaine persists, my dear, in putting me off with excuses. Try if *you* can persuade him.'

'*I* am not likely to have any influence, Adelaide.'

The tone in which she replied struck Romaine. He looked at her. Her eyes, gravely meeting his eyes, held him with a strange fascination. She was not herself conscious how openly all that was noble and true in her nature, all that was most deeply and sensitively felt in her aspirations, spoke at that moment in her look. Romaine's face changed: he turned pale under the new emotion that she had roused in him. Lady Loring observed him attentively.

‘Perhaps you underrate your influence, Stella?’ she suggested.

Stella remained impenetrable to persuasion. ‘I have only been introduced to Mr. Romaine half an hour since,’ she said. ‘I am not vain enough to suppose that I can produce a favourable impression on anyone in so short a time.’

She had expressed, in other words, Romaine’s own idea of himself, in speaking of her to Lord Loring. He was struck by the coincidence.

‘Perhaps we have begun, Miss Eyrecourt, by misinterpreting one another,’ he said. ‘We may arrive at a better understanding when I have the honour of meeting you again.’

He hesitated, and looked at Lady Loring. She was not the woman to let a fair oppor-

tunity escape her. ‘We will say to-morrow evening,’ she resumed, ‘at seven o’clock.’

‘To-morrow,’ said Romaine. He shook hands with Stella, and left the picture gallery.

Thus far, the conspiracy to marry him promised even more hopefully than the conspiracy to convert him. And Father Benwell, carefully instructing Penrose in the next room, was not aware of it!

But the hours, in their progress, mark the march of events as surely as they mark the march of time. The day passed, the evening came—and, with its coming, the prospects of the conversion brightened in their turn.

Let Father Benwell himself relate how it happened—in an extract from his report to Rome, written the same evening.

‘ . . . I had arranged with Penrose that he should call at my lodgings, and tell me how he had prospered at the first performance of his duties as secretary to Romaine.

‘ The moment he entered the room, the signs of disturbance in his face told me that something serious had happened. I asked directly if there had been any disagreement between Romaine and himself.

‘ He repeated the word with every appearance of surprise. “ Disagreement ? ” he said. “ No words can tell how sincerely I feel for Mr. Romaine. I cannot express to you, Father, how eager I am to be of service to him ! ”

‘ Relieved so far, I naturally asked what had happened. Penrose betrayed a marked embarrassment in answering my question.

“I have innocently surprised a secret,” he said, “on which I had no right to intrude. All that I can honourably tell you, shall be told. Add one more to your many kindnesses—don’t command me to speak, when it is my duty towards a sorely-tried man to be silent, even to you.”

‘It is needless to say that I abstained from directly answering this strange appeal. “Let me hear what you *can* tell,” I replied, “and then we shall see.”

‘Upon this, he spoke. I need hardly recall to your memory how careful we were, in first planning the attempt to recover the Vange property, to assure ourselves of the promise of success which the peculiar character of the present owner held out to us. In reporting what Penrose said, I communicate a discovery, which I venture to

think will be as welcome to you, as it was to me.

‘He began by reminding me of what I had myself told him in speaking of Romaine. “You mentioned having heard from Lord Loring of a great sorrow or remorse from which he was suffering,” Penrose said. “I know what he suffers and why he suffers, and with what noble resignation he submits to his affliction. We were sitting together at the table, looking over his notes and memoranda, when he suddenly dropped the manuscript from which he was reading to me. A ghastly paleness overspread his face. He started up, and put both his hands to his ears as if he heard something dreadful, and was trying to deafen himself to it. I ran to the door to call for help. He stopped me ;

he spoke in faint gasping tones, forbidding me to call anyone in to witness what he suffered. It was not the first time, he said ; it would soon be over. If I had not courage to remain with him I could go, and return when he was himself again. I so pitied him that I found the courage to remain. When it was over he took me by the hand, and thanked me. I had stayed by him like a friend, he said, and like a friend he would treat me. Sooner or later (those were his exact words) I must be taken into his confidence—and it should be now. He told me his melancholy story. I implore you, Father, don't ask me to repeat it! Be content if I tell you the effect of it on myself. The one hope, the one consolation for him, is in our holy religion. With all my heart I devote myself to his

conversion—and, in my inmost soul, I feel the conviction that I shall succeed !”

‘To this effect, and in this tone, Penrose spoke. I abstained from pressing him to reveal Romaine’s confession. The confession is of no consequence to *us*. You know how the moral force of Arthur’s earnestness and enthusiasm fortifies his otherwise weak character. I, too, believe he will succeed.

‘To turn for a moment to another subject. You are already informed that there is a woman in our way. I have my own idea of the right method of dealing with this obstacle when it shows itself more plainly. For the present, I need only assure you that neither this woman nor any woman shall succeed in her designs on Romaine, if can prevent it.’

Having completed his report in these terms, Father Benwell reverted to the consideration of his proposed inquiries into the past history of Stella's life.

Reflection convinced him that it would be unwise to attempt, no matter how guardedly, to obtain the necessary information from Lord Loring or his wife. If he assumed, at his age, to take a strong interest in a Protestant young lady, who had notoriously avoided him, they would certainly feel surprise—and surprise might, in due course of development, turn to suspicion.

There was but one other person under Lord Loring's roof, to whom he could address himself—and that person was the housekeeper. As an old servant, possessing Lady Loring's confidence, she might prove a source of information on the subject of Lady Loring's

fair friend; and, as a good Catholic, she would feel flattered by the notice of the spiritual director of the household.

‘It may not be amiss,’ thought Father Benwell, ‘if I try the housekeeper.’

CHAPTER VI.

THE ORDER OF THE DISHES.

WHEN Miss Notman assumed the post of housekeeper in Lady Loring's service, she was accurately described as 'a competent and respectable person ;' and was praised, with perfect truth, for her incorruptible devotion to the interests of her employers. On its weaker side, her character was represented by the wearing of a youthful wig, and the erroneous conviction that she still possessed a fine figure. The ruling idea in her narrow little mind was the idea of her own dignity. Any offence offered in this direction oppressed her memory for days together, and found

its way outwards in speech to any human being whose attention she could secure.

At five o'clock, on the day which followed his introduction to Romaine, Father Benwell sat drinking his coffee in the housekeeper's room—to all appearance as much at his ease as if he had known Miss Notman from the remote days of her childhood. A new contribution to the housekeeper's little library of devotional works lay on the table, and bore silent witness to the means by which he had made those first advances which had won him his present position. Miss Notman's sense of dignity was doubly flattered. She had a priest for her guest, and a new book with the reverend gentleman's autograph inscribed on the title-page.

‘Is your coffee to your liking, Father?’

‘A little more sugar, if you please.’

Miss Notman was proud of her hand, viewed as one of the meritorious details of her figure. She took up the sugar-tongs with suavity and grace; she dropped the sugar into the cup with a youthful pleasure in ministering to the minor desires of her illustrious guest. ‘It is so good of you, Father, to honour me in this way,’ she said—with the appearance of sixteen super-induced upon the reality of sixty.

Father Benwell was an adept at moral disguises of all kinds. On this occasion he wore the disguise of pastoral simplicity. ‘I am an idle old man at this hour of the afternoon,’ he said. ‘I hope I am not keeping you from any household duties?’

‘I generally enjoy my duties,’ Miss Notman answered. ‘To-day, they have not been so agreeable as usual: it is a relief to

me to have done with them. Even my humble position has its trials.'

Persons acquainted with Miss Notman's character, hearing these last words, would have at once changed the subject. When she spoke of 'her humble position,' she invariably referred to some offence offered to her dignity, and she was invariably ready to state the grievance at full length. Ignorant of this peculiarity, Father Benwell committed a fatal error. He inquired, with courteous interest, what the housekeeper's 'trials' might be.

'Oh, sir, they are beneath your notice!' said Miss Notman, modestly. 'At the same time, I should feel it an honour to have the benefit of your opinion—I should so like to know that you do not altogether disapprove of my conduct, under some provocation.'

You see, Father, the whole responsibility of ordering the dinners falls on me. And, when there is company, as there is this evening, the responsibility is particularly trying to a timid person like myself.'

'A large dinner party, Miss Notman?'

'Oh, dear, no! Quite the reverse. Only one gentleman—Mr. Romaine.'

Father Benwell set down his cup of coffee, half way to his lips. He at once drew the correct conclusion that the invitation to Romaine must have been given and accepted after he had left the picture gallery. That the object was to bring Romaine and Stella together, under circumstances which would rapidly improve their acquaintance, was as plain to him as if he had heard it confessed in so many words. If he had only remained in the gallery, he

might have become acquainted with the form of persuasion used to induce a man so unsocial as Romaine to accept an invitation. 'I have myself to blame,' he thought bitterly, 'for being left in the dark.'

'Anything wrong with the coffee?' Miss Notman asked anxiously.

He rushed on his fate. He said, 'Nothing whatever. Pray go on.'

Miss Notman went on.

'You see, Father, Lady Loring was unusually particular about the dinner on this occasion. She said, "Lord Loring reminds me that Mr. Romaine is a very little eater, and yet very difficult to please in what he does eat." Of course I consulted my experience, and suggested exactly the sort of dinner that was wanted under the circumstances. I wish to do her ladyship the

utmost justice. She made no objection to the dinner in itself. On the contrary, she complimented me on what she was pleased to call my ready invention. But when we came next to the order in which the dishes were to be served——’ Miss Notman paused in the middle of the sentence, and shuddered over the private and poignant recollections which the order of the dishes called up.

By this time Father Benwell had discovered his mistake. He took a mean advantage of Miss Notman’s susceptibilities to slip his own private inquiries into the interval of silence.^a

‘Pardon my ignorance,’ he said ; ‘ my own poor dinner is a matter of ten minutes, and one dish. I don’t understand a difference of opinion on a dinner for three people

only Lord and Lady Loring, two; Mr. Romaine, three—oh! perhaps I am mistaken? Perhaps Miss Eyrecourt makes a fourth?’

‘Certainly, Father!’

‘A very charming person, Miss Notman. I only speak as a stranger. You, no doubt, are much better acquainted with Miss Eyrecourt?’

‘Much better, indeed—if I may presume to say so,’ Miss Notman replied. ‘She is my lady’s intimate friend; we have often talked of Miss Eyrecourt during the many years of my residence in this house. On such subjects, her ladyship treats me quite on the footing of an humble friend. A complete contrast to the tone she took, Father, when we came to the order of the dishes. We agreed, of course, about the

soup and the fish; but we had a little, a very little, divergence of opinion, as I may call it, on the subject of the dishes to follow. Her ladyship said, "First the sweetbreads, and then the cutlets." I ventured to suggest that the sweetbreads, as white meat, had better not immediately follow the turbot, as white fish. "The brown meat, my lady," I said, "as an agreeable variety presented to the eye, and then the white meat, recalling pleasant remembrances of the white fish." You see the point, Father?'

'I see, Miss Notman, that you are a consummate mistress of an art which is quite beyond poor me. Was Miss Eyrecourt present at the little discussion?'

'Oh, no! Indeed, I should have objected to her presence; I should have said

she was a young lady out of her proper place.'

'Yes, yes ; I understand. Is Miss Eyre-court an only child?'

'She had two sisters, Father Benwell. One of them is in a convent.'

'Ah, indeed?'

'And the other is dead.'

'Sad for the father and mother, Miss Notman!'

'Pardon me, sad for the mother, no doubt. The father died long since.'

'Aye? aye? A sweet woman, the mother? At least, I think I have heard so.'

Miss Notman shook her head. 'I should wish to guard myself against speaking unjustly of anyone,' she said; 'but when you talk of "a sweet woman," you imply (as it

seems to me) the domestic virtues. Mrs. Eyrecourt is essentially a frivolous person.'

A frivolous person is, in the vast majority of cases, a person easily persuaded to talk, and not disposed to be reticent in keeping secrets. Father Benwell began to see his way already to the necessary information. 'Is Mrs. Eyrecourt living in London?' he inquired.

'Oh, dear, no! At this time of year she lives entirely in other people's houses--goes from one country seat to another, and only thinks of amusing herself. No domestic qualities, Father. *She* would know nothing of the order of the dishes! Lady Loring, I should have told you, gave way in the matter of the sweetbread. It was only at quite the latter part of my "Menoo" (as the French call it) that she showed a spirit

of opposition——well ! well ! I won't dwell on that. I will only ask *you*, Father, at what part of a dinner an oyster-omelette ought to be served ?'

Father Benwell seized his opportunity of discovering Mrs. Eyrecourt's present address. 'My dear lady,' he said, 'I know no more when the omelette ought to be served than Mrs. Eyrecourt herself ! It must be very pleasant, to a lady of her way of thinking, to enjoy the beauties of Nature inexpensively—as seen in other people's houses, from the point of view of a welcome guest. I wonder whether she is staying at any country seat which I happen to have seen ?'

'She may be in England, Scotland, or Ireland, for all I know,' Miss Notman answered, with an unaffected ignorance which placed her good faith beyond doubt.

‘Consult your own taste, Father. After eating jelly, cream, and ice-pudding, could you even *look* at an oyster-omelette without shuddering? Would you believe it? Her ladyship proposed to serve the omelette with the cheese. Oysters, after sweets! I am not (as yet) a married woman——’

Father Benwell made a last desperate effort to pave the way for one more question before he submitted to defeat. ‘That must be *your* fault, my dear lady!’ he interposed, with his persuasive smile.’

Miss Notman simpered. ‘You confuse me, Father!’ she said softly.

‘I speak from inward conviction, Miss Notman. To a looker-on, like myself, it is sad to see how many sweet women, who might be angels in the households of worthy men, prefer to lead a single life. The

Church, I know, exalts the single life to the highest place. But even the Church allows exceptions to its rule. Under this roof, for example, I think I see two exceptions. One of them my unfeigned respect' (he bowed to Miss Notman) 'forbids me to indicate more particularly. The other seems, to my humble view, to be the young lady of whom we have been speaking. Is it not strange that Miss Eyrecourt has never been married?'

The trap had been elaborately set; Father Benwell had every reason to anticipate that Miss Notman would walk into it. The disconcerting housekeeper walked up to it—and then proved unable to advance a step farther.

'I once made the same remark myself to Lady Loring,' she said.

Father Benwell's pulse began to quicken

its beat. ‘Yes?’ he murmured, in tones of the gentlest encouragement.

‘And her ladyship,’ Miss Notman proceeded, ‘did not encourage me to go on. “There are reasons for not pursuing that subject,” she said; “reasons into which, I am sure, you will not expect me to enter.” She spoke with a flattering confidence in my prudence, which I felt gratefully. Such a contrast to her tone when the omelette presented itself in the order of the dishes! As I said just now, I am not a married woman. But if I proposed to my husband to give him an oyster-omelette after his puddings and his pies, I should not be surprised if he said to me, “My dear, have you taken leave of your senses?” I reminded Lady Loring (most respectfully) that a *cheese*-omelette might be in its proper place if it followed the

sweets. “An *oyster-omelette*,” I suggested, “surely comes after the birds?” I should be sorry to say that her ladyship lost her temper—I will only mention that I kept mine. Let me repeat what she said, and leave you, Father, to draw your own conclusions. She said, “Which of us is mistress in this house, Miss Notman? I order the *oyster-omelette* to come in with the cheese.” There was not only irritability, there was contempt—oh, yes! contempt in her tone. Out of respect for myself, I made no reply. As a Christian, I can forgive; as a wounded gentlewoman, I may not find it so easy to forget.’

Miss Notman laid herself back in her easy chair—she looked as if she had suffered martyrdom, and only regretted having been obliged to mention it. Father Benweil

surprised the wounded gentlewoman by rising to his feet.

‘You are not going away already, Father?’

‘Time flies fast in your society, dear Miss Notman. I have an engagement—and I am late for it already.’

The housekeeper smiled sadly. ‘At least let me hear that you don’t disapprove of my conduct under trying circumstances,’ she said.

Father Benwell took her hand. ‘A true Christian only feels offences to pardon them, he remarked, in his priestly and paternal character. ‘You have shown me, Miss Notman, that *you* are a true Christian. My evening has indeed been well spent. God bless you!’

He pressed her hand; he shed on her

the light of his fatherly smile ; he sighed, and took his leave. Miss Notman's eyes followed him out with devotional admiration.

Father Benwell still preserved his serenity of temper when he was out of the housekeeper's sight. One important discovery he had made, in spite of the difficulties placed in his way. A compromising circumstance had unquestionably occurred in Stella's past life ; and, in all probability, a man was in some way connected with it. ' My evening has not been entirely thrown away,' he thought, as he ascended the stairs which led from the housekeeper's room to the hall.

CHAPTER VII.

THE INFLUENCE OF STELLA.

ENTERING the hall, Father Benwell heard a knock at the house door. The servants appeared to recognise the knock—the porter admitted Lord Loring.

Father Benwell advanced and made his bow. It was a perfect obeisance of its kind—respect for Lord Loring, unobtrusively accompanied by respect for himself. ‘Has your lordship been walking in the park?’ he inquired.

‘I have been out on business,’ Lord Loring answered; ‘and I should like to tell you about it. If you can spare me a few

minutes, come into the library. Some time since,' he resumed, when the door was closed, 'I think I mentioned that my friends had been speaking to me on a subject of some importance—the subject of opening my picture gallery occasionally to the public.'

'I remember,' said Father Benwell. 'Has your lordship decided what to do?'

'Yes. I have decided (as the phrase is) to "go with the times," and follow the example of other owners of picture galleries. Don't suppose I ever doubted that it is my duty to extend, to the best of my ability, the civilising influences of Art. My only hesitation in the matter arose from a dread of some accident happening, or some injury being done, to the pictures. Even now, I can only persuade myself to try the experiment under certain restrictions.'

‘A wise decision, undoubtedly,’ said Father Benwell. ‘In such a city as this, you could hardly open your gallery to anybody who happens to pass the house-door.’

‘I am glad you agree with me, Father. The gallery will be opened for the first time on Monday. Any respectably-dressed person, presenting a visiting card at the offices of the librarians in Bond Street and Regent Street, will receive a free ticket of admission ; the number of the tickets, it is needless to say, being limited, and the gallery being only opened to the public two days in the week. You will be here, I suppose, on Monday ?’

‘Certainly. My work in the library, as your lordship can see, has only begun.’

‘I am very anxious about the success of this experiment,’ said Lord Loring. ‘Do look in at the gallery once or twice in the

course of the day, and tell me what your own impression is.'

Having expressed his readiness to assist 'the experiment' in every possible way, Father Benwell still lingered in the library. He was secretly conscious of a hope that he might, at the eleventh hour, be invited to join Romaine at the dinner-table. Lord Loring only looked at the clock on the mantelpiece : it was nearly time to dress for dinner. The priest had no alternative but to take the hint, and leave the house.

Five minutes after he had withdrawn, a messenger delivered a letter for Lord Loring, in which Father Benwell's interests were directly involved. The letter was from Romaine ; it contained his excuses for breaking his engagement, literally at an hour's notice.

‘Only yesterday,’ he wrote, ‘I had a return of what you, my dear friend, call “the delusion of the voice.” The nearer the hour of your dinner approaches, the more keenly I fear that the same thing may happen in your house. Pity me, and forgive me.’

Even good-natured Lord Loring felt some difficulty in pitying and forgiving, when he read these lines. ‘This sort of caprice might be excusable in a woman,’ he thought. ‘A man ought really to be capable of exercising some self-control. Poor Stella! And what will my wife say?’

He walked up and down the library, with Stella’s disappointment and Lady Loring’s indignation prophetically present in his mind. There was, however, no help for it—he must accept his responsibility, and be the bearer of the bad news.

He was on the point of leaving the library, when a visitor appeared. The visitor was no less a person than Romaine himself. ‘Have I arrived before my letter?’ he asked eagerly.

Lord Loring showed him the letter.

‘Throw it into the fire,’ he said, ‘and let me try to excuse myself for having written it. You remember the happier days when you used to call me the creature of impulse? An impulse produced that letter. Another impulse brings me here to disown it. I can only explain my strange conduct by asking you to help me at the outset. Will you carry your memory back to the day of the medical consultation on my case? I want you to correct me, if I inadvertently misrepresent my advisers. Two of them were physicians. The third, and last, was a

surgeon, a personal friend of yours ; and *he*, as well as I recollect, told you how the consultation ended ? ’

‘ Quite right, Romaine—so far.’

‘ The first of the two physicians,’ Romaine proceeded, ‘ declared my case to be entirely attributable to nervous derangement, and to be curable by purely medical means. I speak ignorantly ; but, in plain English, that, I believe, was the substance of what he said ? ’

‘ The substance of what he said,’ Lord Loring replied, ‘ and the substance of his prescriptions—which, I think, you afterwards tore up ? ’

‘ If you have no faith in a prescription,’ said Romaine, ‘ that is, in my opinion, the best use to which you can put it. When it came to the turn of the second physician, he

differed with the first, as absolutely as one man can differ with another. The third medical authority, your friend the surgeon, took a middle course, and brought the consultation to an end by combining the first physician's view and the second physician's view, and mingling the two opposite forms of treatment in one harmonious result?'

Lord Loring remarked that this was not a very respectful way of describing the conclusion of the medical proceedings. That it *was* the conclusion, however, he could not honestly deny.

'As long as I am right,' said Romaine, 'nothing else appears to be of much importance. As I told you at the time, the second physician appeared to me to be the only one of the three authorities who really understood my case. Do you mind giving

me, in few words, your own impression of what he said ? ’

‘ Are you sure that I shall not distress you ? ’

‘ On the contrary, you may help me to hope.’

‘ As I remember it,’ said Lord Loring, ‘ the doctor did not deny the influence of the body over the mind. He was quite willing to admit that the state of your nervous system might be one, among other predisposing causes, which led you—I really hardly like to go on.’

‘ Which led me,’ Romaine continued, finishing the sentence for his friend, ‘ to feel that I never shall forgive myself—accident or no accident—for having taken that man’s life. Now go on.’

‘ The delusion that you still hear the

voice,' Lord Loring proceeded, 'is, in the doctor's opinion, the moral result of the morbid state of your mind at the time when you really heard the voice on the scene of the duel. The influence acts physically, of course, by means of certain nerves. But it is essentially a moral influence; and its power over you is greatly maintained by the self-accusing view of the circumstances which you persist in taking. That, in substance, is my recollection of what the doctor said.'

'And when he was asked what remedies he proposed to try,' Romaine inquired, 'do you remember his answer? "The mischief which moral influences have caused, moral influences alone can remedy."' '

'I remember,' said Lord Loring. 'And he mentioned, as examples of what he meant,

the occurrence of some new and absorbing interest in your life, or the working of some complete change in your habits of thought—or perhaps some influence exercised over you by a person previously unknown, appearing under unforeseen circumstances, or in scenes quite new to you.’

Romayne’s eyes sparkled.

‘Now you are coming to it!’ he cried. ‘Now I feel sure that I recall correctly the last words the doctor said:—“If my view is the right one, I should not be surprised to hear that the recovery which we all wish to see had found its beginning in such apparently trifling circumstances as the tone of some other person’s voice or the influence of some other person’s look.” That plain expression of his opinion only occurred to my memory after I had written my foolish

letter of excuse. I spare you the course of other recollections that followed, to come at once to the result. For the first time I have the hope, the faint hope, that the voice which haunts me has been once already controlled by one of the influences of which the doctor spoke—the influence of a look.’

If he had said this to Lady Loring, instead of to her husband, she would have understood him at once. Lord Loring asked for a word more of explanation.’

‘I told you yesterday,’ Romaine answered, ‘that a dread of the return of the voice had been present to me all the morning, and that I had come to see the picture with an idea of trying if change would relieve me. While I was in the gallery I was free from the dread, and free from the voice. When I returned to the hotel it tortured

me—and Mr. Penrose, I grieve to say, saw what I suffered. You and I attributed the remission to the change of scene. I now believe we were both wrong. Where was the change? In seeing you and Lady Loring, I saw the two oldest friends I have. In visiting your gallery, I only revived the familiar associations of hundreds of other visits. To what influence was I really indebted for my respite? Don't try to dismiss the question by laughing at my morbid fancies. Morbid fancies are realities to a man like me. Remember the doctor's words, Loring. Think of a new face, seen in your house! Think of a look that searched my heart for the first time!'

Lord Loring glanced once more at the clock on the mantel-piece. The hands pointed to the dinner hour.

‘ Miss Eyrecourt ? ’ he whispered.

‘ Yes ; Miss Eyrecourt.’

The library door was thrown open by a servant. Stella herself entered the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRIEST OR THE WOMAN?

LORD LORING hurried away to his dressing-room. ‘I won’t be more than ten minutes,’ he said—and left Romaine and Stella together.

She was attired with her customary love of simplicity. White lace was the only ornament on her dress of delicate silvery grey. Her magnificent hair was left to plead its own merits, without adornment of any sort. Even the brooch which fastened her lace pelerine was of plain gold only. Conscious that she was showing her beauty to the greatest advantage in the eyes of a

man of taste, she betrayed a little of the embarrassment which Romaine had already noticed at the moment when she gave him her hand. They were alone, and it was the first time she had seen him in evening dress.

It may be that women have no positive appreciation of what is beautiful in form and colour—or it may be that they have no opinions of their own when the laws of fashion have spoken. This at least is certain, that not one of them in a thousand sees anything objectionable in the gloomy and hideous evening costume of a gentleman in the nineteenth century. A handsome man is, to their eyes, more seductive than ever in the contemptible black coat and the stiff white cravat which he wears in common with the servant who waits on him at table. After a stolen glance

at Romaine, Stella lost all confidence in herself—she began turning over the photographs on the table.

The momentary silence which followed their first greeting became intolerable to her. Rather than let it continue, she impulsively confessed the uppermost idea in her mind when she entered the room.

‘I thought I heard my name when I came in,’ she said. ‘Were you and Lord Loring speaking of me?’

Romaine owned without hesitation that they had been speaking of her.

She smiled, and turned over another photograph. But when did sun-pictures ever act as a restraint on a woman’s curiosity? The words passed her lips in spite of her. ‘I suppose I mustn’t ask what you were saying?’

It was impossible to answer this plainly without entering into explanations from which Romaine shrank. He hesitated.

She turned over another photograph. 'I understand,' she said. 'You were talking of my faults.' She paused, and stole another look at him. 'I will try to correct my faults, if you will tell me what they are.'

Romaine felt that he had no alternative but to tell the truth—under certain reserves. 'Indeed you are wrong,' he said. 'We were talking of the influence of a tone or a look on a sensitive person.'

'The influence on Me?' she asked.

'No. The influence which You might exercise on another person.'

She knew perfectly well that he was speaking of himself. But she was deter-

mined to feel the pleasure of making him own it.

‘If I have any such influence as you describe,’ she began, ‘I hope it is for good?’

‘Certainly for good.’

‘You speak positively, Mr. Romaine. Almost as positively—only that can hardly be—as if you were speaking from experience.’

He might still have evaded a direct reply, if she had been content with merely saying this. But she looked at him while she spoke. He answered the look.

‘Shall I own that you are right?’ he said. ‘I was thinking of my own experience yesterday.’

She returned to the photographs. ‘It sounds impossible,’ she rejoined softly. There

was a pause. ‘Was it anything I said?’ she asked.

‘No. It was only when you looked at me. But for that look, I don’t think I should have been here to-day.’

She shut up the photographs on a sudden, and drew her chair a little away from him.

‘I hope,’ she said, ‘you have not so poor an opinion of me as to think I like to be flattered?’

Romayne answered with an earnestness that instantly satisfied her.

‘I should think it an act of insolence to flatter you,’ he said. ‘If you knew the true reason why I hesitated to accept Lady Loring’s invitation—if I could own to you the new hope for myself that has brought me here—you would feel, as I feel, that I

have been only speaking the truth. I daren't say yet that I owe you a debt of gratitude for such a little thing as a look. I must wait till time puts certain strange fancies of mine to the proof.'

‘Fancies about me, Mr. Romaine?’

Before he could answer, the dinner bell rang. Lord and Lady Loring entered the library together.

The dinner having pursued its appointed course (always excepting the case of the omelette), the head servant who had waited at table was graciously invited to rest, after his labours, in the housekeeper's room. Having additionally conciliated him by means of a glass of rare liqueur, Miss Notman, still feeling her grievance as acutely as ever, ventured to inquire, in the first place,

if the gentlefolks upstairs had enjoyed their dinner. So far the report was, on the whole, favourable. But the conversation was described as occasionally flagging. The burden of the talk had been mainly borne by my lord and my lady, Mr. Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt contributing but little to the social enjoyment of the evening. Receiving this information without much appearance of interest, the housekeeper put another question, to which, judging by her manner, she attached a certain importance. She wished to know if the oyster-omelette (accompanying the cheese) had been received as a welcome dish, and treated with a just recognition of its merits. The answer to this was decidedly in the negative. Mr. Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt had declined to taste it. My lord had tried it, and had

left it on his plate. My lady alone had really eaten her share of the misplaced dish. Having stated this apparently trivial circumstance, the head servant was surprised by the effect which it produced on the housekeeper. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, with an appearance of unutterable enjoyment. That night there was one supremely happy woman in London. And her name was Miss Notman.

Ascending from the housekeeper's room to the drawing-room, it is to be further reported that music was tried, as a means of getting through the time, in the absence of general conversation. Lady Loring sat down at the piano, and played as admirably as usual. At the other end of the room Romaine and Stella were together, listening to the music. Lord Loring walking backwards

and forwards, with a restlessness which was far from being characteristic of him in his after-dinner hours, was stopped when he reached the neighbourhood of the piano by a private signal from his wife.

‘What are you walking about for?’ Lady Loring asked in a whisper, without interrupting her musical performance.

‘I’m not quite easy, my dear.’

‘Turn over the music. Indigestion?’

‘Good heavens, Adelaide, what a question.’

‘Well, what is it then?’

Lord Loring looked towards Stella and her companion. ‘They don’t seem to get on together as well as I had hoped,’ he said.

‘I should think not—when you are walking about and disturbing them! Sit down there behind me.’

‘What am I to do?’

‘Am I not playing? Listen to me.’

‘My dear, I don’t understand modern German music.’

‘Then read the evening paper.’

The evening paper had its attractinos. Lord Loring took his wife’s advice.

Left entirely by themselves, at the other end of the room, Romaine and Stella justified Lady Loring’s belief in the result of reducing her husband to a state of repose. Stella ventured to speak first, in a discreet undertone.

‘Do you pass most of your evenings alone, Mr. Romaine?’

‘Not quite alone. I have the company of my books.’

‘Are your books the companions that you like best?’

‘I have been true to those companions, Miss Eyrecourt, for many years. If the doctors are to be believed, my books have not treated me very well in return. They have broken down my health, and have made me, I am afraid, a very unsocial man.’ He seemed about to say more, and suddenly checked the impulse. ‘Why am I talking of myself?’ he resumed with a smile. ‘I never do it at other times. Is this another result of your influence over me?’

He put the question with an assumed gaiety. Stella made no effort, on her side, to answer him in the same tone.

‘I almost wish I really had some influence over you,’ she said gravely and sadly.

‘Why?’

‘I should try to induce you to shut up

your books, and choose some living companion who might restore you to your happier self.'

'It is already done,' said Romaine; 'I have a new companion in Mr. Penrose.'

'Penrose?' she repeated. 'He is the friend—is he not—of the priest here, whom they call Father Benwell?'

'Yes.'

'I don't like Father Benwell.'

'Is that a reason for disliking Mr. Penrose?'

'Yes,' she said boldly, 'because he is Father Benwell's friend.'

'Indeed you are mistaken, Miss Eyrecourt. Mr. Penrose only entered yesterday on his duties as my secretary, and I have already had reason to think highly of him. Many men, after *that* experience of me,' he

added, speaking more to himself than to her, ‘might have asked me to find another secretary.’

Stella heard those last words, and looked at him in astonishment. ‘Were you angry with Mr. Penrose?’ she asked innocently. ‘Is it possible that *you* could speak harshly to any person in your employment?’

Romayne smiled. ‘It was not what I said,’ he answered. ‘I am subject to attacks—to sudden attacks of illness. I am sorry I alarmed Mr. Penrose by letting him see me under those circumstances.’

She looked at him; hesitated; and looked away again. ‘Would you be angry with me if I confessed something?’ she said timidly.

‘It is impossible I can be angry with you!’

‘Mr. Romaine, I think I have seen what your secretary saw. I know how you suffer, and how patiently you bear it.’

‘You!’ he exclaimed.

‘I saw you with your friend, when you came on board the steamboat at Boulogne. Oh, no, you never noticed me! You never knew how I pitied you. And afterwards, when you moved away by yourself, and stood by the place in which the engines work—you are sure you won’t think the worse of me, if I tell it?’

‘No! no!’

‘Your face frightened me—I can’t describe it—I went to your friend and took it on myself to say that you wanted him. It was an impulse—I meant well.’

‘I am sure you meant well.’ As he

spoke, his face darkened a little, betraying a momentary feeling of distrust. Had she put indiscreet questions to his travelling companion; and had the Major, under the persuasive influence of her beauty, been weak enough to answer them. ‘Did you speak to my friend?’ he asked.

‘Only when I told him that he had better go to you. And I think I said afterwards I was afraid you were very ill. We were in the confusion of arriving at Folkestone—and, even if I had thought it right to say more, there was no opportunity.’

Romayne felt ashamed of the suspicion by which he had wronged her. ‘You have a generous nature,’ he said earnestly. ‘Among the few people whom I know, how many would feel the interest in me that you felt?’

‘Don’t say that, Mr. Romaine! You could have had no kinder friend than the gentleman who took care of you on your journey. Is he with you now, in London?’

‘No.’

‘I am sorry to hear it. You ought to have some devoted friend always near you.’

She spoke very earnestly. Romaine shrank, with a strange shyness, from letting her see how her sympathy affected him. He answered lightly. ‘You go almost as far as my good friend there reading the newspaper,’ he said. ‘Lord Loring doesn’t scruple to tell me that I ought to marry. I know he speaks with a sincere interest in my welfare. He little thinks how he distresses me.’

‘Why should he distress you?’

‘He reminds me—live as long as I may—that I must live alone. Can I ask a

woman to share such a dreary life as mine? It would be selfish, it would be cruel; I should deservedly pay the penalty of allowing my wife to sacrifice herself. The time would come when she would repent having married me.'

Stella rose. Her eyes rested on him with a look of gentle remonstrance. 'I think you hardly do women justice,' she said softly. 'Perhaps some day a woman may induce you to change your opinion.' She crossed the room to the piano. 'You must be tired of playing, Adelaide,' she said, putting her hand caressingly on Lady Loring's shoulder.

'Will you sing, Stella?'

She sighed, and turned away. 'Not to-night,' she answered.

Romayne took his leave rather hurriedly.

He seemed to be out of spirits and eager to get away. Lord Loring accompanied his guest to the door. 'You look sad and care-worn,' he said. 'Do you regret having left your books to pass an evening with us?'

Romayne looked up absently, and answered, 'I don't know yet.'

Returning to report this extraordinary reply to his wife and Stella, Lord Loring found the drawing-room empty. Eager for a little private conversation, the two ladies had gone upstairs.

'Well?' said Lady Loring, as they sat together over the fire. 'What did he say?'

Stella only repeated what he had said before she rose and left him. 'What is there in Mr. Romayne's life,' she asked,

‘which made him say that he would be selfish and cruel if he expected a woman to marry him? It must be something more than mere illness. If he had committed a crime, he could not have spoken more strongly. Do you know what it is?’

Lady Loring looked uneasy. ‘I promised my husband to keep it a secret from everybody,’ she said.

‘It is nothing degrading, Adelaide—I am sure of that.’

‘And you are right, my dear. I can understand that he has surprised and disappointed you ; but, if you knew his motives ——’ she stopped, and looked earnestly at Stella. ‘They say,’ she went on, ‘the love that lasts longest is the love of slowest growth. This feeling of yours for Romaine is of sudden growth. Are you very sure

that your whole heart is given to a man of whom you know little?'

'I know that I love him,' said Stella simply.

'Even though he doesn't seem, as yet, to love *you*? ' Lady Loring asked.

'All the more *because* he doesn't. I should be ashamed to make the confession to anyone but you. It is useless to say any more. Good-night.'

Lady Loring allowed her to get as far as the door, and then suddenly called her back. Stella returned unwillingly and wearily. 'My head aches and my heart aches,' she said. 'Let me go away to my bed.'

'I don't like you to go away, wronging Romaine perhaps in your thoughts,' said Lady Loring. 'And, more than that, for the sake of your own happiness, you ought

to judge for yourself if this devoted love of yours may ever hope to win its reward. It is time, and more than time, that you should decide whether it is good for you to see Romaine again. Have you courage enough to do that?’

‘Yes—if I am convinced that it ought to be done.’

‘Nothing would make *me* so happy,’ Lady Loring resumed, ‘as to know that you were one day, my dear, to be his wife. But I am not a prudent person—I can never look, as you can, to consequences. You won’t betray me, Stella? If I am doing wrong in telling a secret which has been trusted to me, it is my fondness for you that misleads me. Sit down again. You shall know what the misery of Romaine’s life really is.’

With those words, she told the terrible story of the duel, and of all that had followed it.

‘It is for you to say,’ she concluded, ‘whether Romaine is right. Can any woman hope to release him from the torment that he suffers, with nothing to help her but love? Determine for yourself.’

Stella answered instantly.

‘I determine to be his wife!’

With the same pure enthusiasm, Penrose had declared that he too devoted himself to the deliverance of Romaine. The loving woman was not more resolved to give her whole life to him, than the fanatical man was resolved to convert him. On the same common battle-ground the two were now to meet in unconscious antagonism. Would the priest or the woman win the day?’

CHAPTER IX.

THE PUBLIC AND THE PICTURES.

ON the memorable Monday, when the picture gallery was opened to the public for the first time, Lord Loring and Father Benwell met in the library.

‘Judging by the number of carriages already at the door,’ said Father Benwell, ‘your lordship’s kindness is largely appreciated by the lovers of Art.’

‘All the tickets were disposed of in three hours,’ Lord Loring answered. ‘Everybody (the librarians tell me) is eager to see the pictures. Have you looked in yet?’

‘Not yet. I thought I would get on first with my work among the books.’

‘I have just come from the gallery,’ Lord Loring continued. ‘And here I am, driven out of it again by the remarks of some of the visitors. You know my beautiful copies of Raphael’s Cupid and Psyche designs? The general impression, especially among the ladies, is that they are disgusting and indecent. That was enough for me. If you happen to meet Lady Loring and Stella, kindly tell them that I have gone to the club.’

‘Do the ladies propose paying a visit to the gallery?’

‘Of course—to see the people! I have recommended them to wait until they are ready to go out for their drive. In their indoor costume they might become the objects

of general observation, as the ladies of the house. I shall be anxious to hear, Father, if you can discover the civilising influences of Art among my guests in the gallery. Good morning.'

Father Benwell rang the bell when Lord Loring had left him.

'Do the ladies drive out to-day at their usual hour?' he inquired, when the servant appeared. The man answered in the affirmative. The carriage was ordered at three o'clock.

At half-past two Father Benwell slipped quietly into the gallery. He posted himself midway between the library door and the grand entrance; on the watch, not for the civilising influences of Art, but for the appearance of Lady Loring and Stella. He was still of opinion that Stella's 'frivolous'

mother might be turned into a source of valuable information, on the subject of her daughter's earlier life. The first step towards attaining this object was to discover Mrs. Eyrecourt's present address. Stella would certainly know it—and Father Benwell felt a just confidence in his capacity to make the young lady serviceable, in this respect, to the pecuniary interests of the Church.

After an interval of a quarter of an hour, Lady Loring and Stella entered the gallery by the library door. Father Benwell at once advanced to pay his respects.

For some little time he discreetly refrained from making any attempt to lead the conversation to the topic that he had in view. He was too well acquainted with the insatiable interest of women in looking at other women to force himself into notice. The

ladies made their remarks on the pretensions to beauty and to taste in dress among the throng of visitors—and Father Benwell waited by them, and listened, with the resignation of a modest young man. Patience, being a virtue, is sometimes its own reward. Two gentlemen, evidently interested in the pictures, approached the priest. He drew back, with his ready politeness, to let them see the picture before which he happened to be standing.

The movement disturbed Stella. She turned sharply—noticed one of the gentlemen, the taller of the two—became deadly pale—and instantly quitted the gallery. Lady Loring, looking where Stella had looked, frowned angrily, and followed Miss Eyrecourt into the library. Wise Father Benwell let them go, and concentrated his attention on

the person who had been the object of this startling recognition.

Unquestionably a gentleman—with light hair and complexion—with a bright benevolent face, and keen intelligent blue eyes—apparently still in the prime of life. Such was Father Benwell's first impression of the stranger. He had evidently seen Miss Eyre-court at the moment when she first noticed him; and he too showed signs of serious agitation. His face flushed deeply, and his eyes expressed, not merely surprise, but distress. He turned to his friend. 'This place is hot,' he said; 'let us get out of it!'

'My dear Winterfield!' the friend remonstrated, 'we haven't seen half the pictures yet.'

'Excuse me if I leave you,' the other replied. 'I am used to the free air of the

country. Let us meet again this evening. Come and dine with me. The same address as usual—Derwent's Hotel.'

With those words he hurried out, making his way, without ceremony, through the crowd in the picture gallery.

Father Benwell returned to the library. It was quite needless to trouble himself further about Mrs. Eyrecourt or her address. 'Thanks to Lord Loring's picture gallery,' he thought, 'I have found the man!'

He took up his pen and made a little memorandum — 'Winterfield. Derwent's Hotel.'

CHAPTER X.

FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.

I.

To Mr. Bitrake. Private and Confidential.

Sir,—I understand that your connection with the law does not exclude your occasional superintendence of confidential inquiries, which are not of a nature to injure your professional position. The enclosed letter of introduction will satisfy you that I am incapable of employing your experience in a manner unbecoming to you, or to myself.

The inquiry that I propose to you relates to a gentleman named Winterfield. He is now staying in London, at Derwent's Hotel,

and is expected to remain there for a week from the present date. His place of residence is on the North Devonshire coast, and is well known in that locality by the name of Beaupark House.

The range of my proposed inquiry dates back over the last four or five years—certainly not more. My object is to ascertain, as positively as may be, whether, within this limit of time, events in Mr. Winterfield's life have connected him with a young lady named Miss Stella Eyrecourt. If this proves to be the case, it is essential that I should be made acquainted with the whole of the circumstances.

I have now informed you of all that I want to know. Whatever the information may be, it is most important that it shall be information which I can implicitly trust.

Please address to me, when you write, under cover to the friend whose letter I enclose.

I beg your acceptance—as time is of importance—of a cheque for preliminary expenses, and remain, sir, your faithful servant,

AMBROSE BENWELL.

II.

To the Secretary, Society of Jesus, Rome.

I enclose a receipt for the remittance which your last letter confides to my care. Some of the money has been already used in prosecuting inquiries, the result of which will, as I hope and believe, enable me to effectually protect Romaine from the advances of the woman who is bent on marrying him.

You tell me that our Reverend Fathers, lately sitting in council on the Vange Abbey affair, are anxious to hear if any positive steps have yet been taken towards the conversion of Romaine. I am happily able to gratify their wishes, as you shall now see.

Yesterday, I called at Romaine's hotel to pay one of those occasional visits which help to keep up our acquaintance. He was out, and Penrose (for whom I asked next) was with him. Most fortunately, as the event proved, I had not seen Penrose, or heard from him, for some little time ; and I thought it desirable to judge for myself of the progress that he was making in the confidence of his employer. I said I would wait. The hotel servant knows me by sight. I was shown into Romaine's waiting-room.

This room is so small as to be a mere

cupboard. It is lit by a glass fanlight over the door which opens from the passage, and is supplied with air (in the absence of a fireplace) by a ventilator in a second door, which communicates with Romaine's study. Looking about me, so far, I crossed to the other end of the study, and discovered a dining-room and two bedrooms beyond—the set of apartments being secluded, by means of a door at the end of the passage, from the other parts of the hotel. I trouble you with these details in order that you may understand the events that followed.

I returned to the waiting-room, not forgetting of course to close the door of communication.

Nearly an hour must have passed before I heard footsteps in the passage. The study door was opened, and the voices of persons

entering the room reached me through the ventilator. I recognised Romaine, Penrose—and Lord Loring.

The first words exchanged among them informed me that Romaine and his secretary had overtaken Lord Loring in the street, as he was approaching the hotel door. The three had entered the house together—at a time, probably, when the servant who had admitted me was out of the way. However it may have happened, there I was, forgotten in the waiting-room!

Could I intrude myself (on a private conversation perhaps) as an unannounced and unwelcome visitor? And could I help it, if the talk found its way to me through the ventilator, along with the air that I breathed? If our Reverend Fathers think I was to blame, I bow to any reproof which their strict sense

of propriety may inflict on me. In the meantime I beg to repeat the interesting passages in the conversation, as nearly word for word as I can remember them.

His lordship, as the principal personage in social rank, shall be reported first. He said, ‘More than a week has passed, Romaine, and we have neither seen you nor heard from you. Why have you neglected us?’

Here, judging by certain sounds that followed, Penrose got up discreetly, and left the room. Lord Loring went on.

He said to Romaine, ‘Now we are alone, I may speak to you more freely. You and Stella seemed to get on together admirably that evening when you dined with us. Have you forgotten what you told me of her influence over you? or have you altered

your opinion—and is that the reason why you keep away from us?’

Romayne answered, ‘My opinion remains unchanged. All that I said to you of Miss Eyrecourt, I believe as firmly as ever.’

His lordship remonstrated, naturally enough. ‘Then why remain away from the good influence? Why—if it really *can* be controlled—risk another return of that dreadful nervous delusion?’

‘I have had another return.’

‘Which, as you yourself believe, might have been prevented! Romayne, you astonish me.’

There was a time of silence, before Romayne answered this. He was a little mysterious when he did reply. ‘You know the old saying, my good friend—of two evils,

choose the least. I bear my sufferings as one of two evils, and the least of the two.'

Lord Loring appeared to feel the necessity of touching a delicate subject with a light hand. He said, in his pleasant way, 'Stella isn't the other evil, I suppose?'

'Most assuredly not.'

'Then what is it?'

Romayne answered, almost passionately, 'My own weakness and selfishness! Faults which I must resist, or become a mean and heartless man. For me, the worst of the two evils is there. I respect and admire Miss Eyrecourt—I believe her to be a woman in a thousand—don't ask me to see her again! Where is Penrose? Let us talk of something else.'

Whether this wild way of speaking offended Lord Loring, or only discouraged

him, I cannot say. I heard him take his leave in these words :—‘ You have disappointed me, Romaine. We will talk of something else the next time we meet.’ The study door was opened and closed. Romaine was left by himself.

Solitude was apparently not to his taste just then. I heard him call to Penrose. I heard Penrose ask, ‘ Do you want me ? ’

Romaine answered, ‘ God knows I want a friend—and I have no friend near me but you ! Major Hynd is away, and Lord Loring is offended with me.’

Penrose asked why.

Romaine, thereupon, entered on the necessary explanation. As a priest, writing to priests, I pass over details utterly uninteresting to *us*. The substance of what he said amounted to this :—Miss Eyrecourt had pro-

duced an impression on him which was new to him in his experience of women. If he saw more of her, it might end—I ask your pardon for repeating the ridiculous expression—in his ‘falling in love with her.’ In this condition of mind or body, whichever it may be, he would probably be incapable of the self-control which he had hitherto practised. If she consented to devote her life to him, he might accept the cruel sacrifice. Rather than do this, he would keep away from her, for her dear sake—no matter what he might suffer, or whom he might offend.

Imagine any human being, out of a lunatic asylum, talking in this way. Shall I own to you, my reverend colleague, how this curious self-exposure struck me? As I listened to Romaine, I felt grateful to the famous Council which definitely forbade the

priests of the Catholic Church to marry. *We* might otherwise have been morally enervated by the weakness which degrades Romaine—and priests might have become instruments in the hands of women.

But you will be anxious to hear what Penrose did under the circumstances. For the moment, I can tell you this, he startled me.

Instead of seizing the opportunity, and directing Romaine's mind to the consolations of religion, Penrose actually encouraged him to reconsider his decision. All the weakness of my poor little Arthur's character showed itself in his next words.

He said to Romaine, 'It may be wrong in me to speak to you as freely as I wish to speak. But you have so generously admitted me to your confidence—you have been so

considerate and so kind towards me—that I feel an interest in your happiness, which perhaps makes me over bold. Are you very sure that some such entire change in your life as your marriage might not end in delivering you from your burden? If such a thing could be, is it wrong to suppose that your wife's good influence over you might be the means of making your marriage a happy one? I must not presume to offer an opinion on such a subject. It is only my gratitude, my true attachment to you, that ventures to put the question. Are you conscious of having given this matter—so serious a matter for you—sufficient thought?’

Make your mind easy, reverend sir! Romaine's answer set everything right.

He said, ‘I have thought of it till I could think no longer. I still believe that sweet

woman might control the torment of the voice. But could she deliver me from the remorse perpetually gnawing at my heart? I feel as murderers feel. In taking another man's life—a man who had not even injured me!—I have committed the one unattonable and unpardonable sin. Can any human creature's influence make me forget that? No more of it—no more. Come! Let us take refuge in our books.'

Those words touched Penrose in the right place. Now, as I understand his scruples, he felt that he might honourably speak out. His zeal more than balanced his weakness, as you will presently see.

He was loud, he was positive, when I heard him next. 'No!' he burst out, 'your refuge is not in books, and not in the barren religious forms which call themselves

Protestant. Dear master, the peace of mind, which you believe you have lost for ever, you will find again in the divine wisdom and compassion of the holy Catholic Church. There is the remedy for all that you suffer ! There is the new life that will yet make you a happy man ! ’

I repeat what he said, so far, merely to satisfy you that we can trust his enthusiasm, when it is once roused. Nothing will discourage, nothing will defeat him now. He spoke with all the eloquence of conviction—using the necessary arguments with a force and feeling which I have rarely heard equalled. Romaine’s silence vouched for the effect on him. He is not the man to listen patiently to reasoning which he thinks he can overthrow.

Having heard enough to satisfy me that

Penrose had really begun the good work, I quietly slipped out of the waiting-room, and left the hotel.

To-day being Sunday, I shall not lose a post if I keep my letter open until to-morrow. I have already sent a note to Penrose, asking him to call on me at his earliest convenience. There may be more news for you before post time.

Monday, 10 A.M.

There is more news. Penrose has just left me.

His first proceeding, of course, was to tell me what I had already discovered for myself. He is modest, as usual, about the prospect of success which awaits him. But he has induced Romaine to suspend his historical studies for a few days, and to

devote his attention to the books which we are accustomed to recommend for perusal in such cases as his. This is unquestionably a great gain at starting.

But my news is not at an end yet. Romaine is actually playing our game—he has resolved definitely to withdraw himself from the influence of Miss Eyrecourt! In another hour, he and Penrose will have left London. Their destination is kept a profound secret. All letters addressed to Romaine are to be sent to his bankers.

The motive for this sudden resolution is directly traceable to Lady Loring.

Her ladyship called at the hotel yesterday evening, and had a private interview with Romaine. Her object, no doubt, was to shake his resolution, and to make him submit himself again to Miss Eyrecourt's fasci-

nations. What means of persuasion she used to effect this purpose is of course unknown to us. Penrose saw Romaine after her ladyship's departure, and describes him as violently agitated. I can quite understand it. His resolution to take refuge in secret flight (it is really nothing less) speaks for itself as to the impression produced on him, and the danger from which, for the time at least, we have escaped.

Yes ! I say 'for the time at least.' Don't let our reverend fathers suppose that the money expended on my private inquiries has been money thrown away. Where these miserable love affairs are concerned, women are daunted by no adverse circumstances and warned by no defeat. Romaine has left London, in dread of his own weakness—we must not forget that. The day may yet

come when nothing will interpose between us and failure but my knowledge of events in Miss Eyrecourt's life.

For the present, there is no more to be said.

CHAPTER XI.

STELLA ASSERTS HERSELF.

Two days after Father Benwell had posted his letter to Rome, Lady Loring entered her husband's study, and asked eagerly if he had heard any news of Romaine.

Lord Loring shook his head. 'As I told you yesterday,' he said, 'the proprietor of the hotel can give me no information. I went myself this morning to the bankers, and saw the head partner. He offered to forward letters, but he could do no more. Until further notice, he was positively enjoined not to disclose Romaine's address to anybody. How does Stella bear it?'

‘In the worst possible way,’ Lady Loring answered. ‘In silence.’

‘Not a word even to you?’

‘Not a word.’

At that reply, the servant interrupted them by announcing the arrival of a visitor, and presenting his card. Lord Loring started, and handed it to his wife. The card bore the name of ‘Major Hynd,’ and this line was added in pencil:—‘On business connected with Mr. Romaine.’

‘Show him in directly!’ cried Lady Loring.

Lord Loring remonstrated. ‘My dear! perhaps I had better see this gentleman alone?’

‘Certainly not—unless you wish to drive me into committing an act of the most

revolting meanness! If you send me away I shall listen at the door.'

Major Hynd was shown in, and was duly presented to Lady Loring. After making the customary apologies, he said, 'I returned to London last night, expressly to see Romaine on a matter of importance. Failing to discover his present address at the hotel, I had the hope that your lordship might be able to direct me to our friend.'

'I am sorry to say I know no more than you do,' Lord Loring replied. 'Romaine's present address is a secret confided to his bankers, and to no one else. I will give you their names, if you wish to write to him.'

Major Hynd hesitated. 'I am not quite sure that it would be discreet to write to him, under the circumstances.'

Lady Loring could no longer keep

silence. ‘Is it possible, Major Hynd, to tell us what the circumstances are?’ she asked. ‘I am almost as old a friend of Romaine as my husband—and I am very anxious about him.’

The Major looked embarrassed. ‘I can hardly answer your ladyship,’ he said, ‘without reviving painful recollections——’

Lady Loring’s impatience interrupted the Major’s apologies. ‘Do you mean the duel?’ she inquired.

Lord Loring interposed. ‘I should tell you, Major Hynd, that Lady Loring is as well informed as I am of what happened at Boulogne, and of the deplorable result, so far as Romaine is concerned. If you still wish to speak to me privately, I will ask you to accompany me into the next room.’

Major Hynd’s embarrassment vanished.

‘After what you tell me,’ he said, ‘I hope to be favoured with Lady Loring’s advice. You both know that Romaine fought the fatal duel with a son of the French General who had challenged him. When we returned to England, we heard that the General and his family had been driven away from Boulogne by pecuniary difficulties. Romaine, against my advice, wrote to the surgeon who had been present at the duel, desiring that the General’s place of retreat might be discovered, and expressing his wish to assist the family anonymously, as their Unknown Friend. The motive, of course, was, in his own words, ‘to make some little atonement to the poor people whom he had wronged.’ I thought it a rash proceeding at the time ; and I am confirmed in my opinion by a letter from the surgeon, received

yesterday. Will you kindly read it to Lady Loring? ’

He handed the letter to Lord Loring. Translated from the French, it ran as follows :—

‘ Sir,—I am at last able to answer Mr. Romaine’s letter definitely, with the courteous assistance of the French Consul in London, to whom I applied when other means of investigation had produced no result.

‘ A week since, the General died. Circumstances connected with the burial expenses informed the Consul that he had taken refuge from his creditors, not in Paris as we supposed, but in London. The address is, Number 10, Camp’s Hill, Islington. I should also add that the

General, for obvious reasons, lived in London under the assumed name of Marillac. It will be necessary, therefore, to inquire for his widow by the name of Madame Marillac.

‘You will perhaps be surprised to find that I address these lines to you, instead of to Mr. Romaine. The reason is soon told.

‘I was acquainted with the late General—as you know—at a time when I was not aware of the company that he kept, or of the deplorable errors into which his love of gambling had betrayed him. Of his widow and his children I know absolutely nothing. Whether they have resisted the contaminating influence of the head of the household—or whether poverty and bad example combined have hopelessly degraded them—I cannot say. There is at least a doubt whether they are worthy of Mr. Romaine’s

benevolent intentions towards them. As an honest man, I cannot feel this doubt, and reconcile it to my conscience to be the means, however indirectly, of introducing them to Mr. Romaine. To your discretion I leave it to act for the best, after this warning.'

Lord Loring returned the letter to Major Hynd. 'I agree with you,' he said. 'It is more than doubtful whether you ought to communicate this information to Romaine.'

Lady Loring was not quite of her husband's opinion. 'While there is a doubt about these people,' she said, 'it seems only just to find out what sort of character they bear in the neighbourhood. In your place, Major Hynd, I should apply to the person in whose house they live, or to the tradespeople whom they have employed.'

‘I am obliged to leave London again to-day,’ the Major replied ; ‘but on my return I will certainly follow your ladyship’s advice.’

‘And you will let us know the result?’

‘With the greatest pleasure.’

Major Hynd took his leave. ‘I think you will be responsible for wasting the Major’s time,’ said Lord Loring, when the visitor had retired.

‘I think not,’ said Lady Loring.

She rose to leave the room. ‘Are you going out?’ her husband asked.

‘No. I am going upstairs to Stella.’

Lady Loring found Miss Eyrecourt in her own room. The little portrait of Romaine which she had drawn from recollection lay on the table before her. She was examining it with the closest attention.

‘ Well, Stella, and what does the portrait tell you ? ’

‘ What I knew before, Adelaide. There is nothing false and nothing cruel in that face.’

‘ And does the discovery satisfy you ? For my part, I despise Romaine for hiding himself from us. Can you excuse him ? ’

Stella locked up the portrait in her writing-case. ‘ I can wait,’ she said quietly.

This assertion of patience seemed to irritate Lady Loring. ‘ What is the matter with you this morning ? ’ she asked. ‘ You are more reserved than ever.’

‘ No ; I am only out of spirits, Adelaide. I can’t help thinking of that meeting with Winterfield. I feel as if some misfortune was hanging over my head.’

‘ Don’t speak of that hateful man ! ’ her

ladyship exclaimed. 'I have something to tell you about Romaine. Are you completely absorbed in your presentiments of evil? or do you think you can listen to me?'

Stella's face answered for her. Lady Loring described the interview with Major Hynd in the minutest detail—including, by way of illustration, the Major's manners and personal appearance. 'He and Lord Loring,' she added, 'both think that Romaine will never hear the last of it if he allows these foreigners to look to him for money. Until something more is known about them, the letter is not to be forwarded.'

'I wish I had the letter!' cried Stella.

'Would you forward it to Romaine?'

'Instantly! Does it matter whether

these poor French people are worthy of his generosity? If it restores his tranquillity to help them, who cares whether they deserve the help? They are not even to know who it is that assists them—Romaine is to be their unknown friend. It is he, not they, whom we have to think of—his peace of mind is everything; their merit is nothing. I say it's cruel to *him* to keep him in ignorance of what has happened. Why didn't you take the letter away from Major Hynd?'

‘Gently, Stella! The Major is going to make inquiries about the widow and children when he returns to London.’

‘When he returns!’ Stella repeated indignantly. ‘Who knows what the poor wretches may be suffering in the interval, and what Romaine may feel if he ever hears

of it? Tell me the address again—it was somewhere in Islington, you said.’

‘Why do you want to know it?’ Lady Loring asked. ‘You are not going to write to Romaine yourself?’

‘I am going to think, before I do anything. If you can’t trust my discretion, Adelaide, you have only to say so!’

It was spoken sharply. Lady Loring’s reply betrayed a certain loss of temper on her side. ‘Manage your own affairs, Stella—I have done meddling with them.’ Her unlucky visit to Romaine at the hotel had been a subject of dispute between the two friends—and this referred to it. ‘You shall have the address,’ my lady added in her grandest manner. She wrote it on a piece of paper, and left the room.

Easily irritated, Lady Loring had the

merit of being easily appeased. That meanest of all vices, the vice of sulkiness, had no existence in her nature. In five minutes she regretted her little outburst of irritability. For five minutes more she waited, on the chance that Stella might be the first to seek a reconciliation. The interval passed, and nothing happened. 'Have I really offended her?' Lady Loring asked herself. The next moment she was on her way back to Stella. The room was empty. She rang the bell for the maid.

'Where is Miss Eyrecourt?'

'Gone out, my lady.'

'Did she leave no message?'

'No, my lady. She went away in a great hurry.'

Lady Loring at once drew the conclusion that Stella had rashly taken the affair of the

General's family into her own hands. Was it possible to say how this most imprudent proceeding might end? After hesitating and reflecting, and hesitating again, Lady Loring's anxiety got beyond her control. She not only decided on following Stella, but, in the excess of her nervous apprehension, she took one of the men-servants with her, in case of emergency!

CHAPTER XII.

THE GENERAL'S FAMILY.

NOT always remarkable for arriving at just conclusions, Lady Loring had drawn the right inference this time. Stella had stopped the first cab that passed her, and had directed the driver to Camp's Hill, Islington.

The aspect of the miserable little street, closed at one end, and swarming with dirty children quarrelling over their play, daunted her for the moment. Even the cabman, drawing up at the entrance to the street, expressed his opinion that it was a queer sort of place for a young lady to venture into alone. Stella thought of Romaine. Her firm per-

suasion that she was helping him to perform an act of mercy, which was (to his mind) an act of atonement as well, roused her courage. She boldly approached the open door of No. 10, and knocked on it with her parasol.

The tangled grey hair and grimy face of a hideous old woman showed themselves slowly at the end of the passage, rising from the strong-smelling obscurity of the kitchen regions. ‘What do you want?’ said the half-seen witch of the London slums. ‘Does Madame Marillac live here?’ Stella asked. ‘Do you mean the foreigner?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Second floor.’ With those instructions the upper half of the witch sank and vanished. Stella gathered her skirts together, and ascended a filthy flight of stairs for the first time in her life.

Coarse voices, shameless language, gross

laughter behind the closed doors of the first floor hurried her on her way to the rooms on the higher flight. Here there was a change for the better—here, at least, there was silence. She knocked at the door on the landing of the second floor. A gentle voice answered, in French, ‘Entrez’—then quickly substituted the English equivalent, ‘Come in.’ Stella opened the door.

The wretchedly furnished room was scrupulously clean. Above the truckle-bed, a cheap little image of the Virgin was fastened to the wall, with some faded artificial flowers arranged above it in the form of a wreath. Two women, in dresses of coarse black stuff, sat at a small round table, working at the same piece of embroidery. The elder of the two rose when the visitor entered the room. Her worn and weary face still showed the

remains of beauty in its finely proportioned parts—her dim eyes rested on Stella with an expression of piteous entreaty. ‘Have you come for the work, madam?’ she asked, in English, spoken with a strong foreign accent. ‘Pray forgive me; I have not finished it yet.’

The second of the two workwomen suddenly looked up.

She, too, was wan and frail; but her eyes were bright; her movements still preserved the elasticity of youth. Her likeness to the elder woman proclaimed their relationship, even before she spoke. ‘Ah! it’s my fault!’ she burst out passionately in French. ‘I was hungry and tired, and I slept hours longer than I ought. My mother was too kind to wake me and set me to work. I am a selfish wretch—and my mother is an angel!’ She

dashed away the tears gathering in her eyes, and proudly, fiercely, resumed her work.

Stella hastened to reassure them, the moment she could make herself heard. ‘Indeed, I have nothing to do with the work,’ she said, speaking in French, so that they might the more readily understand her. ‘I came here, Madame Marillac—if you will not be offended with me, for plainly owning it—to offer you some little help.’

‘Charity?’ asked the daughter, looking up again sternly from her needle.

‘Sympathy,’ Stella answered gently.

The girl resumed her work. ‘I beg your pardon,’ she said; ‘I shall learn to submit to my lot in time.’

The quiet long-suffering mother placed a chair for Stella. ‘You have a kind beautiful face, Miss,’ she said; ‘and I am sure you

will make allowances for my poor girl. I remember the time when I was as quick to feel as she is. May I ask how you came to hear of us ?’

‘I hope you will excuse me,’ Stella replied. ‘I am not at liberty to answer that question.’

The mother said nothing. The daughter asked sharply, ‘Why not ?’

Stella addressed her answer to the mother. ‘I come from a person who desires to be of service to you as an unknown friend,’ she said.

The wan face of the widow suddenly brightened. ‘Oh !’ she exclaimed, ‘has my brother heard of the General’s death ? and has he forgiven me my marriage at last ?’

‘No, no !’ Stella interposed ; ‘I must not mislead you. The person whom I represent is no relation of yours.’

Even in spite of this positive assertion, the poor woman held desperately to the hope that had been roused in her. ‘The name by which you know me may mislead you,’ she suggested anxiously. ‘My late husband assumed the name in his exile here. Perhaps, if I told you——’

The daughter stopped her there. ‘My dear mother, leave this to me.’ The widow sighed resignedly, and resumed her work. ‘Madame Marillac will do very well as a name,’ the girl continued, turning to Stella, ‘until we know something more of each other. I suppose you are well acquainted with the person whom you represent?’

‘Certainly, or I should not be here.’

‘You know the person’s family connections, in that case? and you can say for

certain whether they are French connections or not ? ’

‘ I can say for certain,’ Stella answered, ‘ that they are English connections. I represent a friend who feels kindly towards Madame Marillac ; nothing more.’

‘ You see, mother, you were mistaken. Bear it as bravely, dear, as you have borne other trials.’ Saying this very tenderly, she addressed herself once more to Stella, without attempting to conceal the accompanying change in her manner to coldness and distrust. ‘ One of us must speak plainly,’ she said. ‘ Our few friends are nearly as poor as we are, and they are all French. I tell you positively that we have no English friends. How has this anonymous benefactor been informed of our poverty ? You are

a stranger to us—you cannot have given the information?’

Stella's eyes were now opened to the awkward position in which she had placed herself. She met the difficulty boldly, still upheld by the conviction that she was serving a purpose cherished by Romaine. ‘You had good reasons, no doubt, mademoiselle, when you advised your mother to conceal her true name,’ she rejoined. ‘Be just enough to believe that your “anonymous benefactor” has good reasons for concealment too.’

It was well said, and it encouraged Madame Marillac to take Stella's part. ‘My dear Blanche, you speak rather harshly to this good young lady,’ she said to her daughter. ‘You have only to look at her, and to see that she means well.’

Blanche took up her needle again, with dogged submission. ‘If we *are* to accept charity, mother, I should like to know the hand that gives it,’ she answered. ‘I will say no more.’

‘When you are as old as I am, my dear,’ rejoined Madame Marillac, ‘you will not think quite so positively as you think now I have learnt some hard lessons,’ she proceeded, turning to Stella, ‘and I hope I am the better for them. My life has not been a happy one——’

‘Your life has been a martyrdom!’ said the girl, breaking out again in spite of herself. ‘Oh, my father! my father!’ She pushed aside the work, and hid her face in her hands.

The gentle mother spoke severely for the first time. ‘Respect your father’s memory!’

she said. Blanche trembled and kept silence. 'I have no false pride,' Madame Marillac continued. 'I own that we are miserably poor ; and I thank you, my dear young lady, for your kind intentions towards us, without embarrassing you by any inquiries. We manage to live. While my eyes last, our work helps to support us. My good eldest daughter has some employment as a teacher of music, and contributes her little share to assist our poor household. I don't distrust you—I only say, let us try a little longer if we cannot help ourselves.'

She had barely pronounced the last words, when a startling interruption led to consequences which the persons present had not foreseen. A shrill wailing voice suddenly pierced through the flimsy partition which divided the front room and the back room..

‘Bread!’ cried the voice in French; ‘I’m hungry. Bread! bread!’

The daughter started to her feet. ‘Think of his betraying us at this moment!’ she exclaimed indignantly. The mother rose in silence, and opened a cupboard. Its position was opposite to the place in which Stella was sitting. She saw two or three knives and forks, some cups and saucers and plates, and a folded table-cloth. Nothing else appeared on the shelves; not even the stray crust of bread for which the poor woman had been looking. ‘Go, my dear, and quiet your brother,’ she said—and closed the cupboard door again as patiently as ever.

Stella opened her pocket-book when Blanche had left the room. ‘For God’s sake, take something!’ she cried. ‘I offer

it with the sincerest respect—I offer it as a loan.’

Madame Marillac gently signed to Stella to close the pocket-book again. ‘That kind heart of yours must not be distressed about trifles,’ she said. ‘The baker will trust us until we get the money for our work—and my daughter knows it. If you can tell me nothing else, my dear, will you tell me your Christian name? It is painful to me to speak to you quite as a stranger.’

Stella at once complied with the request. Madame Marillac smiled as she repeated the name.

‘There is almost another tie between us,’ she said. ‘We have your name in France—it speaks with a familiar sound to me in this strange place. Dear Miss Stella, when my poor boy startled you by that cry for food

he recalled to me the saddest of all my anxieties. When I think of *him*, I should be tempted if my better sense did not restrain me—No ! no ! put back the pocket-book. I am incapable of the shameless audacity of borrowing a sum of money which I could never repay. Let me tell you what my trouble is, and you will understand that I am in earnest. I had two sons, Miss Stella. The elder—the most lovable, the most affectionate of my children—was killed in a duel.’

The sudden disclosure drew a cry of sympathy from Stella, which she was not mistress enough of herself to repress. Now for the first time she understood the remorse that tortured Romaine, as she had not understood it when Lady Loring had told her the terrible story of the duel. Attributing the effect produced on her to the sensitive nature

of a young woman, Madame Marillac innocently added to Stella's distress by making excuses.

‘I am sorry to have frightened you, my dear,’ she said. ‘In your happy country such a dreadful death as my son’s is unknown. I am obliged to mention it, or you might not understand what I have still to say. Perhaps I had better not go on?’

Stella roused herself. ‘Yes! yes!’ she answered eagerly. ‘Pray go on!’

‘My son in the next room,’ the widow resumed, ‘is only fourteen years old. It has pleased God sorely to afflict a harmless creature. He has not been in his right mind since—since the miserable day when he followed the duellists, and saw his brother’s death. Oh! you are turning pale! How thoughtless, how cruel of me! I ought to

have remembered that such horrors as these have never overshadowed your happy life ! ’

Struggling to recover her self-control, Stella tried to reassure Madame Marillac by a gesture. The voice which she had heard in the next room was—as she now knew—the voice that haunted Romaine. Not the words that had pleaded hunger and called for bread—but those other words, ‘ Assassin ! assassin ! where are you ? ’—rang in her ears. She entreated Madame Marillac to break the unendurable interval of silence. The widow’s calm voice had a soothing influence which she was eager to feel. ‘ Go on ! ’ she repeated. ‘ Pray go on ! ’

‘ I ought not to lay all the blame of my boy’s affliction on the duel,’ said Madame Marillac. ‘ In childhood, his mind never grew with his bodily growth. His brother’s

death may have only hurried the result which was sooner or later but too sure to come. You need feel no fear of him. He is never violent—and he is the most beautiful of my children. Would you like to see him?’

‘No! I would rather hear you speak of him. Is he not conscious of his own misfortune?’

‘For weeks together, Stella—I am sure I may call you Stella?—he is quite calm; you would see no difference outwardly between him and other boys. Unhappily, it is just at those times that a spirit of impatience seems to possess him. He watches his opportunity, and, however careful we may be, he is cunning enough to escape our vigilance.’

‘Do you mean that he leaves you and his sisters?’

‘Yes, that is what I mean. For nearly two months past he has been away from us. Yesterday only, his return relieved us from a state of suspense which I cannot attempt to describe. We don’t know where he has been, or in the company of what persons he has passed the time of his absence. No persuasion will induce him to speak to us on the subject. This morning we listened while he was talking to himself.’

Was it part of the boy’s madness to repeat the words which still tormented Romaine ? Stella asked if he ever spoke of the duel.

‘Never ! He seems to have lost all memory of it. We only heard, this morning, one or two unconnected words—something about a woman, and then more that appeared to allude to some person’s death. Last night I was with him when he went to bed, and

I found that he had something to conceal from me. He let me fold all his clothes, as usual, except his waistcoat—and that he snatched away from me, and put it under his pillow. We have no hope of being able to examine the waistcoat without his knowledge. His sleep is like the sleep of a dog; if you only approach him, he wakes instantly. Forgive me for troubling you with these trifling details, only interesting to ourselves. You will at least understand the constant anxiety that we suffer.'

'In your unhappy position,' said Stella, 'I should try to resign myself to parting with him—I mean to placing him under medical care.'

The mother's face saddened. 'I have inquired about it,' she answered. 'He must pass a night in the workhouse before he can

be received as a pauper lunatic in a public asylum. Oh, my dear, I am afraid there is some pride still left in me ! He is my only son now ; his father was a General in the French army ; I was brought up among people of good blood and breeding—I can't take my own boy to the workhouse !'

Stella understood her. 'I feel for you with all my heart,' she said. 'Place him privately, dear Madame Marillac, under skilful and kind control—and let me, do let me, open the pocket-book again.'

The widow steadily refused even to look at the pocket-book. 'Perhaps,' Stella persisted, 'you don't know of a private asylum that would satisfy you?'

'My dear, I do know of such a place ! The good doctor who attended my husband in his last illness told me of it. A friend of

his receives a certain number of poor people into his house, and charges no more than the cost of maintaining them. An unattainable sum to *me*! There is the temptation that I spoke of. The help of a few pounds I might accept, if I fell ill, because I might afterwards pay it back. But a larger sum—never!’

She rose, as if to end the interview. Stella tried every means of persuasion that she could think of, and tried in vain. The friendly dispute between them might have been prolonged, if they had not both been silenced by another interruption from the next room.

This time, it was not only endurable, it was even welcome. The poor boy was playing the air of a French vaudeville on a pipe or flageolet. ‘Now he is happy!’ said

the mother. ‘He is a born musician; do come and see him!’ An idea struck Stella. She overcame the inveterate reluctance in her to see the boy so fatally associated with the misery of Romaine’s life. As Madame Marillac led the way to the door of communication between the rooms, she quickly took from her pocket-book the bank-notes with which she had provided herself, and folded them so that they could be easily concealed in her hand.

She followed the widow into the little room.

The boy was sitting on his bed. He laid down his flageolet and bowed to Stella. His long silky hair flowed to his shoulders. But one betrayal of a deranged mind presented itself in his delicate face—his large soft eyes had the glassy vacant look which it is im-

possible to mistake. ‘Do you like music, mademoiselle?’ he asked gently. Stella asked him to play his little vaudeville air again. He proudly complied with the request. His sister seemed to resent the presence of a stranger. ‘The work is at a standstill,’ she said—and passed into the front room. Her mother followed her as far as the door, to give her some necessary directions. Stella seized her opportunity. She put the bank-notes into the pocket of the boy’s jacket, and whispered to him, ‘Give them to your mother when I have gone away.’ Under those circumstances, she felt sure that Madame Marillac would yield to the temptation. She could resist much—but she could not resist her son.

The boy nodded, to show that he understood her. The moment after, he laid

down his flageolet with an expression of surprise.

‘You are trembling!’ he said. ‘Are you frightened?’

She *was* frightened. The mere sense of touching him had made her shudder. Did she feel a vague presentiment of some evil to come from that momentary association with him?

Madame Marillac, turning away again from her daughter, noticed Stella’s agitation. ‘Surely, my poor boy doesn’t alarm you?’ she said. Before Stella could answer, some one outside knocked at the door. Lady Loring’s servant appeared, charged with a carefully-worded message. ‘If you please, Miss, a friend is waiting for you below.’ Any excuse for departure was welcome to Stella at that moment. She promised to call

at the house again in a few days. Madame Marillac kissed her on the forehead as she took leave. Her nerves were still shaken by that momentary contact with the boy. Descending the stairs, she trembled so that she was obliged to hold by the servant's arm. She was not naturally timid. What did it mean?

Lady Loring's carriage was waiting at the entrance of the street, with all the children in the neighbourhood assembled to admire it. She impulsively forestalled the servant in opening the carriage door. 'Come in!' she cried. 'Oh, Stella, you don't know how you have frightened me! Good heavens, you look frightened yourself! From what wretches have I rescued you? Take my smelling bottle, and tell me all about it.'

The fresh air, and the reassuring presence of her old friend, revived Stella. She was able to describe her interview with the General's family, and to answer the inevitable inquiries which the narrative called forth. Lady Loring's last question was the most important of the series:—‘What are you going to do about Romaine?’

‘I am going to write to him the moment we get home.’

The answer seemed to alarm Lady Loring. ‘You won't betray me?’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You won't let Romaine discover that I have told you about the duel?’

‘Certainly not. You shall see my letter before I send it to be forwarded.’

Tranquillised so far, Lady Loring be-thought herself next of Major Hynd. ‘Can

we tell him what you have done?' her ladyship asked.

'Of course we can tell him,' Stella replied. 'I shall conceal nothing from Lord Loring, and I shall beg your good husband to write to the Major. He need only say that I have made the necessary inquiries, after being informed of the circumstances by you, and that I have communicated the favourable result to Mr. Romaine.'

'It's easy enough to write the letter, my dear. But it's not so easy to say what Major Hynd may think of you.'

'Does it matter to me what Major Hynd thinks?'

Lady Loring looked at Stella with a malicious smile. 'Are you equally indifferent,' she said, 'to what Romaine's opinion of your conduct may be?'

Stella's colour rose. 'Try to be serious, Adelaide, when you speak to me of Romaine,' she answered gravely. 'His good opinion of me is the breath of my life.'

An hour later, the important letter to Romaine was written. Stella scrupulously informed him of all that had happened—with two necessary omissions. In the first place, nothing was said of the widow's reference to her son's death, and of the effect produced by it on his younger brother. The boy was simply described as being of weak intellect, and as requiring to be kept under competent control. In the second place, Romaine was left to infer that ordinary motives of benevolence were the only motives, on his part, known to Miss Eyrecourt.

The letter ended in these lines :—

'If I have taken an undue liberty in

venturing, unasked, to appear as your representative, I can only plead that I meant well. It seemed to me to be hard on these poor people, and not just to you in your absence, to interpose any needless delays in carrying out those kind intentions of yours, which had no doubt been properly considered beforehand. In forming your opinion of my conduct, pray remember that I have been careful not to compromise you in any way. You are only known to Madame Marillac as a compassionate person who offers to help her, and who wishes to give that help anonymously. If, notwithstanding this, you disapprove of what I have done, I must not conceal that it will grieve and humiliate me—I have been so eager to be of use to you, when others appeared to hesitate. I must find my consolation in remembering that I have

become acquainted with one of the sweetest and noblest of women, and that I have helped to preserve her afflicted son from dangers in the future which I cannot presume to estimate. You will complete what I have only begun. Be forbearing and kind to me if I have innocently offended in this matter—and I shall gratefully remember the day when I took it on myself to be Mr. Romaine's almoner.'

Lady Loring read these concluding sentences twice over.

'I think the end of your letter will have its effect on him,' she said.

'If it brings me a kind letter in reply,' Stella answered, 'it will have all the effect I hope for.'

'If it does anything,' Lady Loring rejoined, 'it will do more than that.'

‘What more can it do?’

‘My dear, it can bring Romaine back to you.’

Those hopeful words seemed rather to startle Stella than to encourage her.

‘Bring him back to me?’ she repeated.

‘Oh, Adelaide, I wish I could think as you do!’

‘Send the letter to the post,’ said Lady Loring, ‘and we shall see.’

CHAPTER XIII.

FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.

I.

Arthur Penrose to Father Benwell.

REVEREND AND DEAR FATHER,—When I last had the honour of seeing you, I received your instructions to report, by letter, the result of my conversations on religion with Mr. Romaine.

As events have turned out, it is needless to occupy your time by dwelling at any length on this subject, in writing. Mr. Romaine has been strongly impressed by the excellent books which I have introduced to

his notice. He raises certain objections, which I have done my best to meet ; and he promises to consider my arguments with his closest attention, in the time to come. I am happier in the hope of restoring his mental tranquillity—in other and worthier words, of effecting his conversion—than I can tell you in any words of mine. I respect and admire, I may almost say I love, Mr. Romaine.

The details which are wanting in this brief report of progress I shall have the privilege of personally relating to you. Mr. Romaine no longer desires to conceal himself from his friends. He received a letter this morning which has changed all his plans, and has decided him on immediately returning to London. I am not acquainted with the contents of the letter, or with the name of the writer ; but I am pleased, for Mr. Romaine's

sake, to see that the reading of it has made him happy.

By to-morrow evening I hope to present my respects to you.

II.

Mr. Bitrake to Father Benwell.

SIR,—The inquiries which I have instituted at your request have proved successful in one respect.

I am in a position to tell you that events in Mr. Winterfield's life have unquestionably connected him with the young lady named Miss Stella Eyrecourt.

The attendant circumstances, however, are not so easy to discover. Judging by the careful report of the person whom I employ, there must have been serious reasons, in this case, for keeping facts secret and witnesses

out of the way. I mention this, not to discourage you, but to prepare you for delays that may occur on our way to discovery.

Be pleased to preserve your confidence in me, and to give me time—and I answer for the result.

THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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